

*Anthology
of Russian
Short
Stories*

FROM
CLASSICAL
TO MODERN

VOLUME
ONE

Anthology of Russian Short Stories

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CONTENTS

Nikolai YAKUSHIN
Two Centuries of the Russian Short Story

6

Nikolai KARAMZIN
Poor Liza

22

Alexander BESTUZHEV-MARLINSKY
Blood for Blood

40

Alexander PUSHKIN
The Queen of Spades

62

Vladimir ODOYEVSKY
The Sylphid

92

Mikhail LERMONTOV
Taman

118

Nikolai GOGOL
The Nose

132

Vladimir SOLLOGUB
The Blizzard

160

TWO CENTURIES OF THE RUSSIAN SHORT STORY*

The short story is a well-known form and is widespread in world literature. It has, however, developed along its own lines in each country. The changes in the spiritual life of a nation have influenced not only the content of art and literature, but also their forms, including the development of the different genres.

The history of the Russian short story has likewise been very closely bound up with the social-political and literary movement in Russia. Arising at the end of the 18th century the Russian short story did not follow a single course of development and did not immediately take shape as a special and independent genre. For a long time it was "dissolved" within such "minor" prose forms as the novella, the anecdote, the joke and the fairy-tale. The term "short story" did not come into use until the late 1820s. However, for two decades after this, all short prose works were usually called novellas. Only at the end of the 1840s did the short story finally acquire status as a genre although, as before, the dividing line between it and the novella was indeterminate and fluid. It is therefore hardly surprising that many writers often referred to their smaller works sometimes as novellas and sometimes as short stories.

The concept of the "short story" often coincides with that of the "short short story". But if the characteristics of the short short story can be summed up more or less precisely (neatly turned plot, economy in disclosing character, absence of lengthy descriptive passages, an unexpected twist in the development of the action, etc.), then these

features are far from always present in the Russian short story, although they occur quite frequently. In 1835 V. Belinsky* first attempted to classify Russian minor prose. Since the short story as an independent form was still only in process of emergence, he did not distinguish it from the novella. "There are occasions," he wrote, "which, so to speak, are inadequate for drama or the novel, but which are profound and concentrate into a single moment more life than could be experienced in centuries: the novella catches them and confines them within its tight framework. Its form can accommodate anything you like—the light sketch of manners, and the stinging sarcastic mockery of man and society, and the profound mysteries of the soul and the cruel game of the passions. Short and swift, light and profound at the same time, it flits from subject to subject, breaks life up into trifles and tears pages out of the great book of life".

Belinsky identified the most essential features that distinguished the short story from other literary genres, above all the capacity through one fact, one event, or one character to give an idea of the main processes taking place in society and the human mind. The artistic merit of the short story is defined above all by the extent to which the writer can choose from a multiplicity of events and persons passing before him, exactly the ones that reflect what is most characteristic for a given period of society's development. But that is not all. The writer must trace in depth and artistically interpret that event or character and, with the imaginative means at his disposal, help the reader get to the heart of what is happening around him.

This peculiarity of the short story did much to determine its structure. Brevity, a comprehensive storyline, telling artistic detail, a special inner rhythm and profound implications conveying the complexity of the phenomenon or characters portrayed—such are the most typical features of the short story. Some very subtle comments on the short story's artistic structure were made by A. Tvardovsky, who saw it "in the free and uncommonly comprehensive compo-

* Belinsky, V. G. (1811-1848)—leading Russian critic and democrat who had a considerable influence on the whole course of Russian literature.

sition which avoids adherence to the precisely delineated plot and arises as it were directly out of the artist's observations of a phenomenon in life or a character, and most frequently has no 'closed' ending, putting the full-stop after the complete solution of the question or problem raised".

When the characteristics of the short story are being defined, it should not be forgotten that each period of social and literary development leaves a mark on its structure, modifying and transforming it.

The development of the short story in Russian 19th-century literature, and also, incidentally, in later times, was not a steady process. Sometimes other literary genres pushed it into the shade, and sometimes it began to play the leading role. This is entirely explicable. Each era engendered not only new ideas, but also definite forms in which they were embodied. Belinsky noted that "if there are ideas of the age, then there are also forms of the age." The short story sometimes became such a form of the age. It proved particularly popular during the periods of spiritual searchings and shifts in the consciousness of society, when it was essential to solve the most urgent social problems—political, philosophical, aesthetic, legal and so on.

The short story, as a very up-to-date and flexible medium, facilitated a rapid response to the problems troubling society and made it possible to explore anything new that appeared in various spheres of human activity. Of course, it was certainly not always possible to solve the complex tasks of the time in artistic terms, but the very statement of those urgent problems was a significant fact testifying to the great possibilities of the form. Many examples can be quoted of the short story being used to raise, for the first time, urgent social problems.

The emergence and development of the short story in Russia as, incidentally, of other forms, took place under unique circumstances. Throughout nearly the whole of the 19th century, Russian literature was the only possible form of manifestation for the political activity of the advanced social consciousness. With good reason did Nikolai Chernyshevsky write: "...In our mental development, it (literature—*N. Yk.*) plays a more significant part than French,

German or English literature in the intellectual life of those peoples and it shoulders more obligations than any other literature. With us, literature for the meantime, epitomises nearly the whole mental life of the people, and consequently its duty is to concern itself with matters that in other countries are now under the control of other trends of mental activity”.

It was this special role of literature in Russian life during the last century that largely determined the ideological tendentiousness of works in all genres, including “minor prose”.

As has already been mentioned there was no distinction for a long time between the novella and the short story in Russian literature. The beginning of the formation of the short story coincided with appearance at the end of the 18th century of the first sentimental novellas by Nikolai Karamzin in which, for the first time, an interest was shown in man's inner world, the cult of sensibility was proclaimed and a new approach was seen in the portrayal of the hero, who was endowed with sensitive soul and a loving heart, and who was able to feel sympathy and compassion for anyone close to him.

Karamzin's novella, *Poor Liza*, was in the full sense a milestone in the development of Russian prose in general and its minor forms in particular. Not very long, with a neatly worked out plot and written in the person of a “sensitive” hero, this story was long considered a model of the genre.

The true efflorescence of the minor prose forms began life in the 20s and early 30s of the 19th century, when romanticism was becoming the predominant trend in literature. A. Marlinsky, Antony Pogorelsky, Nikolai Pavlov and Vladimir Odoyevsky, among others, created many vivid examples of the romantic short story and novella. Prominent in these was the urge to convey the national colour of Russian life, to reflect the awakening of social self-awareness, evoked by the events of the Patriotic War of 1812 and the Decembrist uprising.

Drawing upon the achievements of Western European short-story writing, the Russian romantics tried to find their way to an interpretation of life. They did not, for example,

widely develop the themes of individualism and mysticism typical of Western romantic literature but profoundly alien to their own. The Russian romantics gave special attention to portraying the spiritually liberated man. The passionate noble hero in the works of the Russian romantics was trying to understand his place in life, to consolidate his independence from the opinions of "society", and to acquire the right to an independent mode of thought and conduct.

The early 1830s, along with examples of romantic "minor prose", saw the appearance of the realistic stories by the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, published as *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*. These showed a profound understanding of the most varied sides of Russian life and are permeated with truly national feeling.

Pushkin had his own conception of prose. In 1822, nearly ten years before the appearance of *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*, he noted: "Precision and brevity—these are the prime merits of prose. It demands ideas and yet more ideas—without them, brilliant expressions serve no purpose." He consistently applied these principles in his own creative practice. *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin* served as a basis for the development of a special kind of Russian short story whose salient features were as follows: profound content, comprehensiveness of form, a neatly worked out plot and elegance of composition. At the same time in his novella *The Queen of Spades* Pushkin and after him, another remarkable Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol (in the collection, *Mirgorod* and in the cycle of Petersburg stories) developed yet another aspect of the short story in which the in-depth development of the characters was combined with a striving for definite generalisations, for the creation of a "type".

In his own short stories and novellas, for example, Gogol concentrated his attention not on some kind of "unusual occurrence", as had been done in the classical novella, but on an ordinary incident which would happen to anyone. This incident was presented either as the psychological exploration of one character ("Diary of a Madman", "The Greatcoat"), or as a scathing satirical grotesque ("The Nose").

Pushkin and Gogol created the first realistic "minor prose" works with a marked desire to solve not only personal problems, but those of Russian life in general. This led to the writing of complete cycles in which reality was presented to the reader in all its aspects and complexities. Examples of this are Pushkin's *The Tales of Belkin*, Gogol's Petersburg stories and Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. Other Russian writers resorted to cycles of tales in this way (for example, Turgenev's *A Hunter's Sketches* and Dostoyevsky's tales about "dreamers").

Each historical period, each stage in the development of social consciousness, each literary trend and even each current in it enriched, in its own way, the content and structure of the Russian short story. The interest, noticed in the 1840s, in the lives of those representing various social strata and classes, the desire to know the actual living conditions, moral needs and spiritual aspirations of the people resulted in the appearance in Russian literature of a great many "physiological" essays. The neatly organised plot and the graceful story ceased to play the dominant role, and the focus shifted to revealing the peculiarities of this or that social type.

The "physiological" essay was widely used by writers of the so called "naturalist school", Vladimir Dahl, Dmitry Grigorovich, Ivan Panayev and others. They strove for the objective analysis of reality in all its manifestations, the portrayal of life as lived by the representatives of various social strata and, above all, descriptions of how the lowest levels of society lived in order to predict at least in some measures the course of Russia's future development.

Turgenev was drawing on the achievements of "physiological" literature when, in his famous *A Hunter's Scetches*, he created a new type of short story in which prominence was given to detailed descriptions of genre subjects, extensive psychological and portrait descriptions of the characters and to wide-ranging and highly poetic landscape paintings. But the most important feature of *A Hunter's Scetches* was the further understanding of life as lived by Russia's biggest class in those days, the enslaved but unbroken Russian peasantry, and the disclosure of its mighty spiritual forces.

In the 1850s, there became evident in Russian literature a heightened interest in man's inner life, in the portrayal of the most subtle psychological experiences or, to quote Chernyshevsky, the famous Russian writer-democrat, "the dialectics of the soul". This tendency was evident in Turgenyev's novellas and short stories (for example "Faust") and Lev Tolstoy's *Tales of Sevastopol*, the autobiographical trilogy, and so on. From this the road ran straight to the creation of the social-psychological novel, which became a leading form in the second half of the 19th century.

In 1861, serfdom was abolished in Russia. Millions of peasants were released from the centuries-old yoke of slavery. This resulted in the growth of capitalist relations in the country, the rise of social consciousness, and the need to rethink many problems, to approach in a new way the portrayal of life as lived by the people. However, in an age when the centuries-old bastions were crumbling, when the political, economic and social way of life was being transformed and deep changes were taking place in the minds of entire social strata and classes, it was impossible to understand and explain everything at once and give, on an epic scale, a fully comprehensive picture of what was happening. Under these conditions, the minor prose forms came to the fore again. The Russian satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, writing about literature's development in the 60s, noted amongst other things: "The ability to group facts together, to grasp the general meaning of life and the ability to approach the subject in a roundabout way and enter into psychological analysis is being lost with every passing day, and with it is being lost the aptitude for creating something complete. Bellen-letters are taking on what might be described as an ethnographic character, devoting themselves to the elaboration of life's details, persistently catching extracts, fragments and elements of it and, to tell the truth, in this meticulous work, it is disclosing not persistence alone, but remarkable skill as well."

In saying this, Saltykov-Shchedrin had in mind the work of a whole constellation of writer-democrats who had brought to literature a new vision of the world, a hatred of all forms of oppression and a passionate desire to make their works express the awakening consciousness of the lower

classes. Nikolai Pomyalovsky, Fyodor Reshetnikov, Vasily Sleptsov, Alexander Levitov and others created a special kind of short story that was structurally close to the essay. They devoted little attention to disclosing the psychology of their characters. They believed that their main objective was to take the lid off the crying contradictions in life around them, to make the reader think hard over the reasons for the disastrous plight of the common people (for example, "The Ward" by V. Sleptsov). In endeavouring to influence the reader directly, they often used shock tactics in their descriptions of events and characters. The truth without frills, the truth, however harsh it might be—such was the basic principle followed by the writers of the 1860s.

The success of this genre began in the 60s and continued into the 70s, when a new group of democratically-inclined populist writers appeared in literature, headed by Gleb Uspensky. Their work reflected many ideas in the doctrine of the populists, who were expressing the interests of the peasantry. In their work, the populist writers aimed at a meticulously exact study of life as lived by the Russian peasantry after the emancipation and by the representatives of the urban poor and at portraying the strong and weak sides of the people's character. During these years, the scope of the minor prose forms widened, free narration, unrestricted by conventions, established itself more firmly, there was a further merging of story plots with the general movement of life and the publicistic principle became stronger, which sometimes pushed descriptive writing into the background. The populist writers often adopted the role of philosopher sociologists, expressing their own ideas and opinions on the topics of the day. This was particularly evident in the work of Gleb Uspensky (for instance, "She Smoothed Me Out"). Moreover, the populist writers concentrated not on disclosing the essential character of a particular person, but on describing the life of the masses as a whole. Their work was very accurately summed up by the well-known Russian revolutionary Georgi Plekhanov, who wrote: "Populist belles-lettres portray not individual characters and not the inner world of individuals but the habits, views and, above all, the social life of the masses. They

searched among the people not for the person in general, with passions and spiritual movements, but the representative of a known social class, the bearer of known social ideas. The populist writers are preoccupied not with vivid artistic images, but with the prosaic although nevertheless burning questions of the people's life." Consequent upon the change in social consciousness and social atmosphere in the Russia of the 80s and 90s, which resulted from the suppression of the revolutionary populist movement and their actions against tsarism and the collapse of faith in the ideals of the populist doctrines, the work of many writers showed a heightened interest in the spiritual and philosophical searchings of the individual, in the quest for universal human happiness and harmony. And answer to these problems was sought in major epic works and in "minor prose" alike.

The new problems engendered new kinds of short story: the confessional (Dostoyevsky's "The Meek One"), the traditions of the past ("The Sentry" by N. Leskov) and others. Important in the literature of that time were the so called "stories for the people", aimed at the mass readership which was only just beginning to acquire knowledge and culture. Lev Tolstoy, Nikolai Leskov and others were very active in this field.

At the turn of the century in Russia and many other countries, the short story became a leading prose form. This was a time of deep disillusion and the decline of the old traditions, a time when there were forebodings of social upheavals to come and searchings for new forms of social existence. Under these conditions, it was the short story that became, to quote Belinsky, a "form of the age", a genre which, through the portrayal of separate phenomena and characters, reflected all the complexity and contradictoriness of the era and the main trends in the moral and philosophical quests of that unsettled time. The most vivid and talented short-story writer of that time was Chekhov. He was able with the greatest verisimilitude and profundity to give in his short stories and novellas a complete picture of life in Russia and the life led by the representatives of all its social strata and groupings. He painted an amazingly varied gallery of characters: from philistines who had re-

tired into their "cockroach corners", to pure, ecstatic and naive dreamers with faith in the triumph of noble ideals.

Chekhov's characters ceased to be the bearers of the writer's conceptions and the mouthpieces for programmed ideas. They began to live their own independent lives and to behave in accordance with the logic of their own natures. The actions and the conduct of Chekhov's characters acquired amazing psychological verisimilitude.

Chekhov's writings epitomised the essential characteristics of the Russian short story: freedom of narration not limited by a strict storyline, flexibility and eloquence of the descriptive passages and extreme objectivity in depicting events. The reader was not to expect a ready-made solution; he had to make his own deductions and generalisations.

Chekhov's short stories certainly did not, as is sometimes believed, sum up the development of the Russian classical story. The traditions of Chekhov's prose were continued by Bunin, and in our times its achievements were, and are, widely drawn on by Soviet writers such as Victor Astafiev, Vassily Belov, Yuri Kazakov, Georgi Semyonov and others.

The beginning of the 20th century was marked not only by social upheavals and conflicts, but also by attempts to review certain principles of classical realism. This circumstance was bound to be reflected in the character of the literary process of that time. The former precision and structural stability of the short story became somewhat blurred. Alongside the realistic story in Russian literature, works appeared with vividly expressed modernist tendencies (the writings of Fyodor Sollogub, Alexei Remizov, and, to some extent, Leonid Andreyev). In its turn, the realistic story began to show a desire for renewal.

The rebirth of the short story in minor prose writings was caused by a desire to respond quickly to the stormy events in social and political life at the beginning of the 20th century, to portray the new social types and to show their role in the social movement. This can be observed in the stories by Alexander Kuprin, Vikenty Veresayev, Alexander Serafimovich, as well as in many works by Leonid Andreyev.

However, the most vivid figure among the democratically inclined writers at the turn of the century was undoubtedly Maxim Gorky, whose work not only reflected to the full that complex era and the radical shift in the public social consciousness of entire social strata, but showed a truly innovative approach to their portrayal. Drawing on the traditions of the Russian classical short story and, above all, on the traditions of the writer-democrats of the 60s and 70s and also on his own rich experience of life, Gorky disclosed more profoundly the social contradictions of reality, looked in a new way at current events and was able to reflect what many of his contemporaries had missed—the awakening consciousness of the proletariat and its growing influence in the social-political movement.

Gorky's short stories and novellas were warmed by a very special feeling of personal involvement in what he was saying. His hero, who is endowed with autobiographical traits, not only reacts sensitively to all that is happening around him, but also tries to enter into events, to do something, to bring about changes. The active standpoint of Gorky's hero to a known degree corresponded to the ideals and aspirations of the writer himself. This is discernible, for example, in the cycle of short stories *Round Russia* in which, together with a profound and daring exposure of the contradictions of Russian society and bitter reflections of the passivity of the populace, there is also an optimistic note sounded by Gorky's faith in the mighty forces of the Russian national character and a conviction that the great ideals of good and justice will triumph in the end. This life-affirming optimism of Gorky's outlook was expressed passionately and poignantly in his short story "A Man is Born".

The beneficial influence of Gorky's talent was felt by many story-writers at the beginning of the century, such as Veresayev, Kuprin, Serafimovich and others. The work of the great proletarian writer, apart from everything else, was a connecting link between Russian classical and Soviet literature and served as the basis for the formation and development of early Soviet prose.

The Great October Socialist Revolution became a turning point in the spiritual development of all humankind. Its main significance was that, in Lenin's words, it set "the

working people only to the road of the *independent* creation of a new life".* The new life underwent complex and sometimes dramatic study. An enormous contribution to the artistic interpretation of events was made by the young Soviet literature. It had to try and solve many highly complex problems which no other literature in the world had ever faced. It was to show that the revolution had been accomplished for the triumph of the humanist ideals long cherished by man. Moreover, it was essential to reflect the awakening consciousness of the people who had thrown off the centuries-long yoke of autocracy and showed how the masses were learning to live and think anew. This was not an easy task. Events were developing too spectacularly and the processes taking place in the spiritual life of people were too deep and serious. There was often no time to explain events, and the abundance of highly contradictory facts made it difficult to give a comprehensive picture of life and to analyse the characters in depth.

It was in the minor prose forms that the first attempts were made to grasp the whole complexity of events and to record the characters of the people taking direct part in them. After the end of the Civil War (1918-1920), the short story became the most widespread form in the new Soviet literature. It was used not only by those who began writing in the pre-revolutionary years (Alexander Serafimovich, Alexei Tolstoy, Boris Pilnyak), but by the new writers who had themselves recently taken part in the revolutionary events. They brought to literature their own experience, gained in fierce fighting (Alexander Fadeyev, Vsevolod Ivanov, Isaak Babel, Alexander Malyshkin and others).

The short stories written in the 20s were remarkably varied, both in structure and in general mood. Side by side with stories on strong plots, there were others written in the epic style; truly tragic stories appeared alongside works imbued with a spirit of optimism. This was fully explicable. Life itself, fraught with the violent conflicts caused by the collapse of the old world, was providing such contradictory material that it could not be conveyed in unidimensional writings. What mattered, however, was that in their ap-

* V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p. 410.

proach to the portrayal of events and characters, the writers were united by a deep faith in the triumph of the new life won by bloody battle, in the victory of the good over the evil in man despite the tragic predicament into which he had been cast by fate (Mikhail Sholokhov, "Alien Blood", Sergei Sergeyev-Tsensky, "Living Water").

In the short stories of the 20s, there is a striving to see in each fact and in each event the basic trend of the time, the conflict between new and old. The contrast between past and present is one of the most important themes in the short stories of that time. On the one hand, the writers wanted to stir up the reader's revulsion for the past life and, on the other, to look back and, from the standpoint of the new life, to review events only just past and interpret and evaluate them afresh (Alexander Malyshkin, "A Train to the South").

Profound humanism and sympathy for the common people in their struggle for the new way of life are the distinguishing features of minor prose in the 20s. It is impossible not to see this as the continuation of the Russian classical short story. The young Soviet writers were persistently seeking for new forms to express their attitude to life. This resulted in new forms of short story. They included Babel's colourful, slightly tongue-in-cheek short stories, Alexander Green's fantasies, Mikhail Prishvin's poetic reflections on the life of man and nature, Mikhail Bulgakov's dramatic narratives and later, the sharply satirical works of Yuri Olesha and Mikhail Zoshchenko.

For many Soviet writers, the short story was a stage nearer the creation of epic works. By the end of the 20s, the first Soviet novels appeared in which the variegated facts were arranged into a comprehensive picture of the world. But right up to the mid-30s, the short story continued to be the leading literary medium, although there were important changes in it. The writers were again concentrating more and more on the fate of the ordinary man, on the growth of his self-awareness and revealing the struggle of good and bad in him. One of the most important themes was the battle with the leftovers of the past and the exposure of the petty-bourgeois mentality as a social evil. Much was written about this by Zoshchenko, Ilf and Pet-

rov, Katayev and others.

There was also a substantial change in the structure of the short story and in the mode of narration. Writers began to turn less frequently to the portrayal of dramatic collisions, preferring to devote more attention to the in-depth exploration of character. In many works the author's own voice began to make itself heard and the lyrical principle was more in evidence.

A fresh approach to the short story was necessitated by the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), when the entire Soviet people rose in defence of their homeland. Soviet writers took their place among the country's defenders. M. Sholokhov, L. Sobolev, K. Simonov, V. Kozhevnikov, A. Platonov and many others went to the front as war correspondents. They wrote short stories as well as front-line despatches and articles. The heroic achievements of the Soviet people in the war became for many years one of the cardinal themes of Soviet literature. A great many stories were written "on the spot" by such masters of prose as K. Simonov ("The Third Adjutant"), M. Sholokhov ("The Science of Hatred"), N. Tikhonov ("The Moment") and A. Tolstoy ("The Russian Character"); war themes continued to predominate during the first peace-time years (in the works of E. Kazakevich, A. Platonov and B. Polevoi) and later in the works of younger writers (G. Baklanov, Yu. Bondarev, V. Bykov and V. Bogomolov).

Soviet war stories told not only about the heroism of Soviet people who saved humanity from the brown plague, but emphasised the tragic destiny of the individual in war ("The Fate of a Man" by M. Sholokhov), the appalling losses caused by war ("The Return" by Platonov and "Sergei Mitrofanovich" by Victor Astafiev), and the inhumanity of war in general, inflicting such sufferings on people.

The short story was greatly enriched by talented writers who had themselves fought at the front and had seen the war "in close-up". The war had made them grow up before their time — after all, it was their generation during those years that was deciding the country's fate and, perhaps, the fate of the whole world. The names of such writers as V. Bogomolov, V. Bykov and G. Baklanov became prominent. War themes were also developed by the writers

whose childhood and early youth had coincided with the war years (Vassily Belov, Vassily Shukshin). Each of them brought to literature not only his own experience of life and his own vision of the world, but also the desire to work out his own particular style of narration, his own individual manner of writing.

A brilliant contribution to the development of the Soviet post-war short story was likewise made by writers of the older generation such as A. Platonov, K. Simonov, K. Paustovsky, V. Lidin, Y. Yashin and others who continued to achieve important successes in the field.

During the last two and a half decades, the short story has been in the upgrade. Never so urgently has the question been raised of man's mutual relationship with the world around him, with the society in which he lives. There has been a heightened interest in the fate of the individual, the unique individuality of the human soul. This is seen with particular vividness in Sholokhov's short story, "The Fate of a Man", in which he shows with the impressive penetration the ability of the Russian character not to give in to inhuman circumstances and to retain all the best that is in it—love for the homeland and faith in the good and in justice.

For many Soviet writers, Sholokhov's story was a stimulus to the more intensive study of the Russian character, to the demonstration of its enormous and sometimes latent potentials. Such, for example, is "Varvara Ivanovna"—a short tale by Vladimir Soloukhin.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to enumerate here every subject tackled by Soviet storytellers. There is not a single problem of any importance whatever that they have not dealt with in their works. They highlighted the relationship between man and nature in the age of the scientific and technological revolution (Astafiev, Yashin, Kazakov), the spiritual experiences of the generation that went through the war (Yuri Nagibin, Vladimir Bogomolov, Georgi Semyonov, Victor Astafiev), the new problems of the Russian countryside (Fyodor Abramov, Efim Dorosh, Vassily Belov, Vladimir Soloukhin), the spiritual quests of the intelligentsia (Yuri Trifonov, Yuri Nagibin, Irina Grekova), the eternal striving of the individual to determine his place in life and his measure of responsibility to people and himself (Yuri

Bondarev). Soviet writers continue to be concerned with the theme of the last war. Not only because the Second World War inflicted incalculable disasters on our land: 20 million Soviet people were killed, hundreds of towns and cities were destroyed. We live in times when the world is threatened by a nuclear catastrophe in the flames of which the whole of humankind could perish. Alarm for the destiny of the planet, for the existence of people all over the world— that is what is troubling our people. Consequently, Soviet writers incessantly emphasise inhumanity of war and endeavour to warn the peoples of the world of a repetition of its horrors.

The scope and variety of problems in the minor prose works led to a search for new forms of narration. In the 60s, for example, the confessional short story and novella became very widespread (Vadim Likhonosov, Anatoly Aleksin), narrative essays presented in the form of a free and confidential chat between the author and his reader (Efim Dorosh, Sergei Krutinin and Vladimir Soloukhin), intensely lyrical tales (Yuri Kazakov), fantasy (Ivan Efremov, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky) and so on. In the writings of Fyodor Abramov, Vassily Belov, Yevgeny Nosov and Georgi Semyonov, however, the Russian classical short story has continued to develop and acquire new subtleties.

The search for new forms of short story continues to this day.

This brief article does not claim to cover the entire history of the short story in Russian classical and Soviet literature. An attempt has been made to trace only in very general form the main trends in the development of the genre and its place in the literary process, and to disclose its role in the spiritual life of society.

The present anthology contains short stories written at various times by writers of different literary trends. Their work reflects the complexity and variety of life in pre-revolutionary Russia and the main stages in the historical development of the young Soviet state.

We hope that the reader will form some impression of the subjects with which Russian and Soviet writers have been concerned at various times, and of the development and variety of forms found for the short story in Russian literature.

Translated by Alex Miller

NIKOLAI KARAMZIN

(1766-1826)

Nikolai Karamzin ushered in the "golden age" of Russian literature. He lived at a time of turbulent events and upheavals: his first publications coincided with the outbreak of the Great French Revolution; he witnessed the Russian people's unprecedented upsurge of patriotism when Napoleon's armies invaded the country, and he witnessed the unparalleled courage of the Russian revolutionary nobility who, in 1825, launched an armed uprising against the tsar in defense of the oppressed people's rights.

Karamzin was a man of brilliant education and versatile talents. He was editor of "Moskovsky Journal" and "Vestnik Yevropy", a translator of Shakespeare and Lessing, a poet, a prose writer, a critic, a journalist, as well as a scholar, whose "History of the Russian State" in many volumes greatly influenced his contemporaries' views on the country's past, and has preserved its importance to this day.

In Russian literature, Karamzin created the genre of psychological story. "Profoundly lyrical in style, these stories revealed the romantic inner world of ordinary people, and traced the emotions of the characters in all their complexity. The action in his stories develops at a fast pace, but it is not the plot that holds the reader's attention, rather the psychological drama, the baring of the holy of holies in a person's inner world, the 'impulses of the heart' of the characters and also of the author himself, who shares his thoughts with the reader and makes no secret of his attitude to his personages," writes P. Makagonenko.

Karamzin's stories and his "Letters of a Russian Traveller" were fabulously popular with the Russian reading public, who had at last acquired a writer who wrote about the feelings of ordinary people. "Poor Liza", a story of betrayed love and shattered hopes, brought him instantaneous and lasting fame.

*POOR LIZA**

Perhaps none of the people living in Moscow knows the environs of this city as well as I do because no one goes out into the country more often than I, and no one takes more walks than I, roaming the meadows, woods, hills and plains wherever my fancy takes me, without a definite plan, without an aim. Every summer I discover new pleasant spots or find a new beauty in the old ones.

But the spot that pleases me best is the one on which rise the gloomy Gothic towers of St. Simon's Monastery. Standing on this hill, you see to the right of you nearly the whole of Moscow, that huge assemblage of houses and churches which appears to the viewer in the form of a majestic amphitheatre: a splendid picture, especially when the sun is shining upon it, when its parting rays are still burnishing the countless domes and the countless heavenward soaring crosses.

Below, spread lush, solid-green flowering meadows, and beyond them, across the yellow sands, flows a clear river, the water ruffled by the light oars of fishing boats or churning noisily under the rudder of one of those heavy boats that come from those fertile lands of the Russian Empire bringing bread for the greedy city.

On the opposite bank of the river you see an oak grove and numerous herds grazing near it; there young shepherds sitting in the shade of the trees, sing their simple plaintive songs to make the summer days, so monotonous for them, pass the more quickly. Further away, amid the thick foliage of ancient elms, gleams the golden dome of St. Daniel's Monastery, and still further away, almost on the horizon, rise the Vorobyov Hills, cloaked in a bluish haze. Now, on

your left you see wide wheat fields, small coppices, three or four villages, and in the distance you glimpse Kolomenskoye with its lofty palace.

I often come to this spot and almost always welcome spring here. I also come here in the gloomy days of autumn to grieve together with Nature. The winds howl terribly inside the walls of the deserted monastery, amid the graves overgrown with tall grasses, and in the dark passageways between the cells. There, leaning on the ruins of the grave-stones, I harken to the moaning of the ages buried in the abyss of time, a moaning that causes my heart to shudder and to quake. Sometimes I go into the cells and try to picture the men who had lived there once—sad pictures! I see a white-haired old monk kneeling before the crucifix and praying for a speedy release from his earthly fetters, for all the pleasures of living have gone for him, all his feelings have died, all save the feeling of illness and feebleness. There, a young monk with a pallid face and a dreamy look gazes at the world through his barred window, he sees gay little birds flitting freely about in the oceans of air, and bitter tears pour from his eyes. He is languishing, pining, wasting away, and I hear his untimely death in the doleful sound of the bell. Sometimes I stand before the gates of the church and contemplate the paintings of the miracles that came to pass in this monastery: here fishes are dropping from the sky to feed the inmates of the monastery, besieged by enemy hordes; there the image of Our Lady turns the foes to flight. All these paintings revive in my memory the history of our country—the sad history of those times when the ferocious Tatars and Lithuanians devastated with fire and sword the environs of Russia's capital, and poor, beleaguered Moscow, like a defenceless widow, had only God to expect help from in her desperate plight.

But what mainly draws me to the walls of St. Simon's Monastery is the memory of Liza's lamentable fate. Poor Liza! Oh dear, how I love stories that touch my heart and make me weep tears of gentle sorrow!

Seventy sazhen or so from the monastery walls, near a small birch grove, there stands in the middle of a green meadow an empty cottage with no doors, no windows, no floors, and a roof that has long since rotted and caved in.

In this cottage some thirty years ago lived beautiful, sweet Liza with her old mother.

Liza's father had been a quite well-to-do villager, well-to-do because he liked to work, tilled his land well, and always led a sober life. But he died, and very soon dire poverty stared his widow and daughter in the face. The lazy hands of their hired labourer did not tend the land properly and it yielded only a poor crop. Liza and her mother were compelled to lease their land for next to nothing. To make matters worse, the poor widow grew weaker by the hour from weeping almost incessantly over the loss of her husband—for peasant women can also love with all their hearts—and was quite unable to do any work. Liza alone—she was fifteen when her father died—toiled day and night, with no thought to spare her tender youth and her rare beauty, weaving linens, knitting stockings, picking flowers in spring and berries in summer and taking them to town to sell. The kind old mother, moved to tears by Liza's tireless endeavours, would press her to her faintly beating heart, calling her daughter a blessing sent by heaven, the provider and comfort in her old age, and begging the Lord to reward her for all that she was doing for her mother.

"God gave me hands to work with," Liza would say. "You nursed me at your breast and took care of me when I was little, and now it's my turn to look after you. Only please stop grieving, please stop crying, our tears will not bring father back..."

But very often poor Liza could not hold back her own tears—oh, too well did she remember that she had a father once and now he was no more, but for her mother's sake she tried to hide her heart-felt sorrow and appear calm and gay.

"Liza dear, I'll stop crying in the next world," her inconsolable old mother would reply. "Everyone will be happy there, it is said. And I, too, will be happy when I see your father. Only I don't want to die yet—what will become of you without me? Who will I entrust you to? No, God willing, I'll see you settled first. Maybe a good man will come along soon. And then I'll bless you, dear children, cross myself and lie down to rest in peace."

Two years passed since the death of Liza's father. There

were flowers in plenty in the meadows, and Liza went to Moscow with bunches of lilies-of-the-valley to sell.

A young, well-dressed and nice looking gentleman came up to her in the street. She showed him the flowers, and blushed. "Are they for sale, lass?" he asked her with a smile. "Yes, kind sir," she replied. "And how much do you want for them?"—"Five kopeks."—"Oh, no, that's too little, here's a ruble for you." Liza was so surprised that she was emboldened to look at the young man and then, blushing an even brighter pink, she dropped her eyes and told him that she would not take a ruble for the flowers. "But why not?"—"I don't want more than they are worth."—"And I think that beautiful flowers picked with the hands of a beautiful girl are well worth a ruble," he said. "But since you won't take my ruble, here is a five-kopek piece. I should always like to buy flowers from you, I should like you to pick them only for me." Liza gave him the flowers, took the five-kopek piece, bowed and turned to go, but the young stranger held her by the hand. "Where will you go now?"—"Home."—"And where is your home?" Liza told him where she lived, and went on her way. The young man did not try to detain her, probably because passers-by were beginning to stop and snigger, looking at them.

When Liza came home, she told her mother all about it. "You did well not to take his ruble. Maybe he's a bad man, who knows..." "Oh, no, mother! I don't think so. He has such a kind face, such a nice voice..." "Still, Liza, it's better to live on what you earn with your own toil and not take anything for nothing. You do not know yet, dear heart, how cruelly wicked people can wrong a poor girl. My heart is uneasy every time you go to town, I always light a candle before the icon and pray the Lord to keep you safe from every kind of evil and disaster." Tears rose to Liza's eyes and she kissed her mother fondly.

The next day Liza picked a bunch of the best lilies-of-the-valley and again went to the same place in town. She stood there, furtively glancing to right and left as if looking for someone. Many people wanted to buy her flowers, but she told them that they were not for sale, and kept looking up and down the street. Evening came, it was time to go home, and on the way she threw the flowers into the

river. "No one shall have you," she said, feeling a strange sadness in her heart.

Towards evening on the following day she was sitting at the window, spinning and singing a plaintive song in a low voice, when suddenly she sprang to her feet and gasped: "Ah!" The young gentleman was standing under her window.

"What's wrong?" her mother, who was sitting beside Liza, asked in alarm. "Nothing, Mother, it's simply that I saw him," Liza replied in a timid voice. "Saw who?" "The gentleman who bought my flowers." The old woman looked out of the window. The young man bowed to her so politely and had such a nice look that she could think no evil of him. "Good evening, kind madam," he said. "I am very tired, and I wonder if you have any fresh milk to spare?" Liza, without waiting for her mother's reply—perhaps because she guessed what it would be—ran to the cellar, fetched a clean earthenware jug covered with a clean wooden disc, snatched up a glass, washed and dried it with a clean towel, filled it with milk and handed it to the stranger through the window, never raising her eyes at him. He drank the milk, and nectar from the hands of Hebe could not have tasted sweeter. It goes without saying that he thanked Liza afterwards, and his glances spoke more eloquently than his words. In the meantime, Liza's mother was telling the young man all about her sorrow and her consolation, that is, about the death of her husband and the sweet goodness of her daughter, her industriousness, her gentleness, etc. etc. He listened to her attentively but his eyes wandered—need I say where? And Liza, shy Liza, also glanced at the young man now and again; but lightning does not flash and vanish in a cloud as swiftly as her blue eyes dropped when they met his.

"I would like your daughter not to sell her work to anyone but me," he said to Liza's mother. "She'll have no need to go to town so often and you won't have to part with her. I can come here myself from time to time."

At these words, a joy that she vainly tried to hide flashed in Liza's eyes, and her cheeks burnt like the sunset on a clear summer evening; she looked at her left sleeve and pinched it with the fingers of her right hand. Her mother

gladly accepted his offer, suspecting no ill intent in it, and assured the young gentleman that the linen woven by Liza were the best ever and wore longer than any others. It was growing dark, and the young man said he must go. "What are we to call you, kind, gentle sir?" Liza's mother asked him. "My name is Erast," he replied. "Erast, Erast!" Liza whispered under her breath. She repeated the name five times as if she were trying to memorise it. Erast bid them to fare well until they met again, and went away. Liza followed him with her eyes, while her mother took her by the hand and said: "Ah Liza, how good and kind he is! If only you married a man like him!" Liza's heart fluttered terribly. "Mother, mother, how could that be! He is a gentleman, and among peasants..." She could not finish.

And now, it is necessary for the reader to know that this young man, this Erast, was a rather wealthy nobleman with plenty of sense and a kind heart; he was kind by nature, but weak and flighty. He led a dissipated life, thought only of his own pleasure, he sought it in the amusements indulged in by fashionable society, but often failed to find it, and so he moped and bemoaned his fate. At first glance Liza's beauty smote him to the heart. He was wont to read novels and idylls, had a rather lively imagination and in thought he was often carried away into those times (whether they ever had been or not) when, if the poets are to be believed, all people strolled about the fields free of care, bathed in pure streams, cooed like doves, rested under the roses and the myrtles, and passed all their days in felicitous idleness. He fancied that in Liza he had found what his heart had long been yearning for. "Nature is calling me to her bosom to taste of pure joys," he was thinking, and resolved, for the time at least, to quit fashionable society.

Let us return to Liza. Night came. Liza's mother blessed her and wished her a dreamless sleep, but this time her wish did not come true: Liza slept very badly. The image of Erast, the newcomer to her heart, appeared to her so vividly that she woke up every other minute and sighed. She got up before sunrise, went down to the Moskva river, sat down on the grassy bank and, dropping her face in her hand, gazed at the white mist hovering over the water,

then rising into the air and leaving sparkling drops of dew on the green carpet. Silence reigned all about Liza. But soon the rising sun awakened all creation: the groves and the shrubbery came alive, the birds took wing and burst into songs, and the flowers lifted their faces to imbibe of the life-giving rays of light. But Liza still sat there with her face dropped sadly in her hand. Ah Liza, Liza, what has befallen you? Until now, waking with the birds you rejoiced in the morning together with them, and your pure, joyful spirit shone in your eyes as the sun shines in the dewdrops; but now you sit lost in thought and do not share in the general joyousness of Nature.

In the meantime a young shepherd was driving his flock along the bank and playing his reed pipe. Watching him, Liza thought: "If only the one who now rules all my thoughts were born a common peasant or a shepherd, and if it were he who was now driving his flock past me! Oh! I'd greet him with a smile and say: 'Good morning, kind shepherd! Where are you driving your flock? The grass grows as green here for your sheep, and the flowers from which a wreath could be woven for your hat are as pretty here!' And he would look at me with tenderness in his eyes and maybe take my hand... Ah, lovely dream!" The shepherd, playing his reed pipe, walked past her with his flock and disappeared behind the nearest rise.

The sound of splashing oars startled Liza. She looked at the river and saw a boat, and Erast in that boat.

She was all of a quiver, and not from fear, needless to say. She stood up to go, but could not make a step. Erast jumped ashore, hurried to Liza, and her dream came partly true, for he looked at her with tenderness in his eyes, and took her hand... And Liza, dear Liza, stood there with downcast eyes, burning cheeks and fluttering heart, unable to pull her hand away, unable to avert her face when he brought his lips close to hers... Ah! He kissed her, he kissed her so ardently that to her the whole world seemed afire! "Sweet Liza," he said, "Sweet Liza, I love you." And these words were echoed in the depths of her soul like heavenly, sublime music; she hardly dared to believe her ears, but... I am dropping my pen. I shall only say that Liza's shyness

vanished in that moment of rapture, and Erast knew that he was loved, loved passionately by this, new to him, pure and open heart.

They sat close together on the grass, gazed into each other's eyes and said: "Love me! " Two hours flew past as one moment. At long last Liza remembered that her mother might be worrying about her. They had to part. "Ah, Erast, will you love me always?" she asked. "Always, sweet Liza, always! " he replied. "Would you swear it on the cross?" "I would, darling Liza, I would! " "No, I don't need your oath. I trust you, Erast, I trust you. Surely you would not deceive poor Liza? It could not be, could it?" "No, Liza, it could not be, no! " "I'm so happy and Mother will be so glad when I tell her that you love me." "Oh, no, Liza, you must not tell her anything." "But why not?" "Old people are prone to be suspicious, and she might imagine something bad in this." "She couldn't." "Even so, I beg you not to say a word to her." "Very well, I'll have to obey you, only I wish I didn't have to keep anything from her." They kissed goodbye and promised to meet every evening on the bank here, or in the birch grove, or somewhere near Liza's cottage, but meet they would without fail. Liza went home, but she turned round a hundred times to look at Erast who still stood on the bank gazing after her.

Liza returned in a mood quite different from the one in which she left the house early that morning. Her face and all her movements revealed the happiness in her heart. "He loves me," she was thinking, delighting in the thought. "Oh, Mother, it's such a lovely morning! " she said to her mother who had only just awakened. "Oh, mother, it's so jolly out in the open! The larks have never sung so well, the sun has never shone so bright, the flowers have never smelt so sweet! " Her mother went out, leaning on her crutch, to enjoy the morning which Liza had described in such charming colours. And indeed she thought it splendid, for her darling daughter had brightened all Nature for her with her own bright mood. "Ah, Liza," she sighed. "How fine everything is in God's world! I've been treading the earth for nigh on three-score years, but still I have not looked my fill at the Maker's good works, I haven't looked my fill at the clear sky above, at the ground which every

year becomes covered with new grass and new flowers. The Heavenly Father must love Man very much, seeing how nicely He has adorned this world for him. Ah Liza! Who of us would want to die if not for the sorrow we knew sometimes? That's how it must be, I suppose. Maybe we'd forget about our immortal soul if tears never poured from our eyes." And Liza was thinking: "I'd sooner forget my immortal soul than my darling lover! "

After that, Erast and Liza, true to their promise, met every evening (when Liza's mother had retired for the night) either on the river bank or in the birch grove, but more often than not under the ancient oaks (some eighty sazhen from the cottage) which cast their shadows on the pure, deep pond, dug out in times of yore. The soft light of the moon coming through the green boughs silvered Liza's fair hair, caressed by her lover's dear hand and the gentle Zephyrs. Often, the moon lit up the tears of love glinting in Liza's eyes, and Erast then kissed them away. They embraced, chastely to be sure, and bashful Cynthia did not hide behind a cloud from them; innocent and immaculate were their embraces. "When you say to me: 'I love you, dearest,' when you hold me close to your heart and look at me with your loving eyes, oh, everything is so well with me, so well that I forget everything but Erast," she said to him. "How strange, how strange it seems now, dearest, that I could live quite contentedly and happily without knowing you. I cannot understand it now, I now think that life without you would not be life at all—just sadness and dreariness. When I don't see your eyes the bright moon turns dark, when I don't hear your voice the nightingale's song sounds dull, when I don't feel your breath the gentle breeze annoys me." Erast was enraptured with his little shepherdess, as he called her, and because she loved him so much he felt a better person. All the amusements of the fashionable world for all their sparkle appeared shabby to him compared with the pure joy he derived from the ardent friendship of this innocent soul. He thought with disgust of the contemptible voluptuousness which his senses used to relish. "I shall live with Liza as brother and sister," he was thinking. "I shall not abuse her love, and shall always be happy!" What a rash promise, young man! Do you really know your own

heart? Can you always answer for its impulses? Will reason always prevail over your emotions?

Liza demanded that Erast should visit her mother more often. "I love her and wish her well, and I think that seeing you is the greatest blessing anyone could know." Indeed, her old mother was always delighted to see Erast. She liked to talk to him about her late husband, to tell him about her young days, how she first met her dear Ivan, how he fell in love with her, and in what love and agreement they had lived. "We could never look our fill at each other, and it was thus till that last hour when death took him from me so cruelly. He died in my arms, you know." And Erast listened to her with genuine pleasure.

He bought from Liza everything she made and always wanted to pay ten times the price she set on her work, but the old woman never accepted an extra kopek from him.

Thus passed several weeks. One evening, Erast waited and waited for Liza, long past the hour of their assignation. She did come at last, but she looked so woebegone and her eyelids were so red and puffy from crying that he was truly alarmed. "Liza, Liza, what's happened?" "Oh, Erast, I've been crying." "Why? What about?" "I must tell you all. The son of a rich peasant from the neighbouring village has sent match-makers and my mother wants me to marry him." "And you have consented?" "Cruel man! How can you ask? I'm sorry for Mother, of course, she is crying and saying that I don't care for her peace of mind and that she'll die in torment if she doesn't marry me off while she's alive. Ah, but Mother doesn't know that I have such a beloved sweetheart!" Erast kissed Liza, saying that her happiness meant more than anything in the world to him and that when her mother died he'd take her away and would live inseparably with her in a paradise, no matter if it was a village or in a dense forest. "But you can't be my husband," she said with a sigh. "Whyever not?" "Because I'm a peasant girl." "You're doing me an injustice," he said. "For me the most important thing is the soul of the one I love, her sensitive, innocent soul, and so Liza will always be closest to my heart! "

She rushed into his arms—in that hour virtue was doomed to perish! Erast felt an extraordinary excitement in his

blood, Liza had never seemed so lovely, her caresses had never stirred him so powerfully, her kisses had never been so ardent, and she knew nothing, suspected nothing, feared nothing. The dark of night nurtured desire—not a star shone in the sky, not a ray of light to dispel her delusion. Erast felt afire and so did Liza, without knowing why and wherefore, without knowing what was happening to her... Ah, Liza, Liza! Where was your guardian angel? Where is your innocence?

The delusion passed in one minute. Liza could not understand her new feelings, she was bewildered and asked Erast to tell her, but he remained silent, seeking and not finding the right words. "I'm frightened, I'm frightened by what's happened to us! I thought that I was dying, that my soul... No, I don't know how to tell it. Why don't you say something, Erast? Why do you sigh? Heavens above what is that?" Lightning flashed across the sky and thunder crashed. Liza trembled all over. "Erast, oh Erast, I'm frightened. A thunder bolt will kill me for the criminal I am!" The thunder rumbled ominously, rain poured in torrents from the dark clouds, it was as if Nature herself was weeping over Liza's lost innocence. Erast tried to comfort her, and took her home to her cottage. She sobbed when she said good-night to him. "Erast, tell me that we'll be as happy as before!" "We shall be, Liza, we shall." "Hope to God we shall! I love you, Erast, so I've got to believe what you say. But in my heart of hearts... No, no more! Forgive me! Till tomorrow then, tomorrow night."

Their rendezvous continued, but how everything had changed! Erast could no longer be satisfied with Liza's innocent caresses alone, with just her loving glances, with just the touch of her hand, with just kisses, with just innocent embraces. He desired more, more and more, and finally there was nothing more to be desired; and any man who knows his own heart, any man who has pondered on the consequence of his most delicious pleasures will certainly agree with me that the fulfillment of all his desires is the most dangerous test of his love. For Erast, Liza was no longer the angel of innocence who once had excited his imagination and filled his soul with rapture. His platonic love was replaced by sensations he could not be proud of

and which, moreover, were already no novelty for him. As for Liza, she surrendered to him entirely, he was the breath of life to her, she obeyed his will in everything like a meek lamb, and thought of his pleasure as her own happiness. However, she did see the change in him and often said: "You were more cheerful before, we were happier and more content, and I wasn't so terribly afraid of losing your love." Sometimes, kissing her good-night, he said: "I shan't be able to see you tomorrow, Liza; an important matter has come up." And every time this happened, Liza responded with a sigh.

And then he failed to come for five days in a row, and Liza was greatly troubled. On the sixth day he came with a sorrowful look on his face and told her: "Liza, dear heart, I have to part with you for a time. You know that we're fighting a war. I'm in the service, and my regiment is going on a campaign." Liza turned pale and almost fainted.

Erast caressed her and told her that he would always love his sweet Liza and hoped never to part with her again when he returned home. She did not speak for a long time, and then she burst into tears, gripped his hand and, looking at him with all the tenderness of her love, asked: "You couldn't possibly stay?" And he replied: "I could, but only at the cost of the greatest ignominy and the greatest blot on my honour. Everyone would despise me, everyone would turn away from me with aversion as from a coward, as from a worthless son of his motherland." "Well, in that case, go where God tells you to go," said Liza. "But you might get killed!" "A man is not afraid of dying for his country, Liza dear." "Oh, I'll die the moment you are no more!" Liza cried. "Why think about it? I hope to remain alive, I hope to come back to you, me dear friend." "God grant it! God grant it! I'll be praying for you every hour of the day. Oh, why can't I read or write! You would write me about everything that was happening to you, and I would write you about my tears for you." "No, Liza, you must take care of yourself, for me, Liza. I don't want you to cry while I'm away." "Cruel man! Would you deny me even that comfort? No, with you gone, I'll stop crying only if my heart dries up." And he said: "Think of that pleasant moment when we shall see each other again." "Oh, I shall, I shall

think about it. If only it came sooner! Dear, sweet Erast, remember your poor Liza who loves you better than she loves herself."

No, I cannot describe what they said to each other that night.

They were to have their last rendezvous on the next day.

Erast came to say goodbye to Liza's mother who could not help crying when she heard that this kind, handsome gentleman had to go off to war. He made her accept some money from him, saying: "While I am away, I do not want Liza to sell her work which, by agreement, belongs to me." The old woman showered him with blessings. "God willing you'll come back to us safe and sound and I'll see you once more in this earthly life. I hope maybe my Liza will find a husband after her heart before then. Oh, how I'd thank the Lord if you came to her wedding! And when Liza's children are born you must stand Godfather to them, kind sir. If only I could live to see the day!" Liza, standing beside her mother, did not dare look at her. The reader can easily imagine what she felt at that moment.

But imagine what she felt when Erast embraced her for that last time, pressed her to his heart and said: "Forgive me, Liza." What a touching scene! The dawn was spreading over the sky in the east like a crimson sea. Erast stood under a tall, ancient oak holding his pale, drooping and woe-begone Liza in his arms. When she said goodbye to him it was as if her soul were parting with her body. All Nature was locked in silence.

Liza sobbed, Erast cried, and when he left her she fell on her knees, raised her arms to heaven and watched him walking away and away until he disappeared from view. The sun came out, and poor, deserted Liza fell in a dead faint.

When she came to her senses, the world appeared bleak and sad. All the beauties of Nature disappeared together with the man of her heart. "Oh, why did I stay behind in this wilderness!" she was thinking. "What is there to stop me from flying after my dear Erast? War holds no fear for me: what is fearsome is to be where he is not. I want to live with him, to die with him, or save his life with mine! Wait, dearest, wait, I'm coming to you." She was about to

run after Erast, but the thought of her mother stopped her. Liza sighed, and with drooping head slowly walked home.

From that hour on her days became days of longing and sorrow, which she had to hide from her loving mother, and her heart ached all the more. She only found relief when, alone in the forest thickets, she could freely weep her heart out, moaning and sobbing with longing for her beloved. Often a sad turtle dove added her plaintive cry to Liza's moaning. But sometimes—very rarely, it is true—a golden ray of hope, a ray of consolation flashed across the darkness of her sorrow. The thought of how happy she would be when he came back and how different everything was going to be cleared her tear-blurred vision, brought the roses back to her cheeks, and made her smile as radiant as a morning in May after a stormy night. Thus passed two months or so.

One day Liza had to go to Moscow to buy some rose water for her mother to bathe her eyes with. In one of the larger streets she saw a gorgeous carriage and in that carriage—Erast. "Oh!" Liza cried and rushed to him, but the carriage rolled past her and turned into a courtyard. Erast stepped down from the carriage and was already mounting the porch steps of the great mansion when suddenly he felt himself clasped in Liza's arms. He turned pale, and then, without saying a word in response to her ejaculations, took her by the hand, brought her to his study, closed the door and said: "Liza, circumstances have changed. I am engaged to be married, you've got to leave me alone and for your own peace of mind forget me. I loved you and I still love you, I mean I wish you the best of everything. Here is a hundred rubles, take it," and he put the money in her pocket. "Let me kiss you for the last time, and then go back home." Before Liza could recover her senses he led her out of the room and ordered a footman: "See this girl out."

My heart bleeds at this minute. I am forgetting that Erast is a man with all his human failings, I am prepared to call damnation down upon his head, but my tongue will not move, I look at the sky and tears roll down my face. Oh, why am I writing not a novel but a sad, true story!

Does it mean that Erast lied to Liza when he told her that he was going off to war? No, he really did join his

regiment but instead of fighting against the enemy he played cards and lost nearly all his fortune. Shortly afterwards peace was concluded, and Erast returned to Moscow up to his neck in debt. The only way out for him was to marry the wealthy and not very young widow who had long been in love with him. He took this decisive step and moved into the widow's house to live, giving up his Liza with a sincere sigh of regret. But can all that justify him?

Liza found herself out in the street in a situation that no pen can describe. "He, he showed me the door! He loves another woman. Oh, ruin is mine!" Such were her thoughts and her feelings. A dead faint interrupted them for a time. A kind-hearted woman who was coming down the street stopped beside Liza, lying on the ground, and tried to bring her round. The poor girl opened her eyes, rose to her feet with the help of this kind woman, thanked her and walked away, herself not knowing where. "I can't go on living," she was saying to herself. "I can't. Oh, if only the sky would fall down on me, if only the earth would swallow me up! But no, the sky won't fall, the earth won't split open. Woe, woe unto me!"

She left the town behind her and suddenly found herself on the shore of the deep pond, shadowed by the ancient oaks, which only a few weeks before had been the silent witnesses of her rapture. The memory shook her to the depths of her soul, and her face became stark with her terrible agony. However, in a minute or two she gathered her thoughts together and, looking about her, saw the daughter of their neighbours (a girl of fifteen) walking along the road. Liza called out to her, gave her the hundred-ruble note she had in her pocket and said: "Anyuta dear, my good, sweet friend, take this money to my mother—it's not stolen money—and tell her that Liza is guilty of keeping from her the secret of her love for a certain cruel gentleman, for E... But why should you know his name? Tell her that he deceived me, and ask her to forgive me, may God help her, and kiss her hand for me as I now kiss yours—tell her that poor Liza asked you to kiss her, tell her that I..." And with these words she jumped into the pond. Anyuta screamed and cried, but she could not rescue Liza, and then she ran to the village, men came and pulled Liza out, but she was already dead.

Thus a young girl, beautiful in body and mind, ended her life. When we meet in our next, new life I'll know you, sweet, gentle Liza!

She was buried near the pond under a gloomy oak, and a wooden cross was put up on her grave. I often sit there, lost in thought, leaning on the abode of Liza's remains. The water ripples before my eyes, and leaves rustle above me...

When Liza's mother heard of her daughter's terrible death, her blood turned to ice from horror, and her eyes closed forever. The wind wails in the walls of the empty cottage, and the superstitious villagers, hearing the eerie sound at night, say: "The dead moan like that: it's poor Liza moaning." Erast was miserable till the end of his days. When he heard of Liza's death he grieved inconsolably and called himself a murderer.

I met him a year before he died. He himself told me this story and took me to Liza's grave. Now, perhaps, they have already made up!

ALEXANDER BESTUZHIEV-MARLINSKY

(1797-1887)

Alexander Bestuzhev-Marlinsky came from an old noble family. He was one of eight children—five boys and three girls—whose father died when they were very young. Four of the brothers played an active part in the armed uprising in Senate Square in St. Petersburg, in December 1825, and after the uprising had been suppressed were sentenced to hard labour in Siberia.

Alexander Bestuzhev, one of the most energetic organisers of the uprising, marched to Senate Square at the head of the Moscow regiment, and after the defeat came to the guard-house of his own free will to share the fate of his arrested brothers and friends. First, he was put in solitary confinement in one of the Baltic fortresses, and then exiled to Yakutsk, thousands of miles from the capital, where the young officer had begun his brilliant career. In 1829, Bestuzhev was transferred as a private without right of promotion to the army fighting in the Caucasus, and was killed in the battle for Cape Adler. His body was never found, and this gave rise to numerous legends.

Such was the tragic fate of one of the initiators and most eloquent spokesmen for romanticism in Russian literature. Endowed with a

diversity of talents, Bestuzhev was also a brilliant critic and editor. Jointly with Kondraty Ryleyev he published the magazine "Polar Star", the name eventually adopted by Alexander Herzen for the political journal he published in London. After 1825, the name of Alexander Bestuzhev—publisher, critic and writer—was seen no more in Russian periodicals, but then, after a long interval, articles and stories signed with the initials A. M. or Alexander Marlinsky (Marli was the place in the environs of St. Petersburg where Bestuzhev spent his carefree boyhood) began to appear in print. Many of Bestuzhev's contemporaries failed to see through the pen-name and did not recognise the well-known writer—exiled, demoted, and deprived of all rights.

Bestuzhev was the first theorist of romanticism in Russia, although many of his stories (for instance, "Trial", 1830) had realist features and were close in spirit to his famous contemporary Alexander Pushkin. True to the principles of romanticism, Bestuzhev held in high regard the national element in literature, and in his stories vividly reproduced the spirit and the mores of the peoples among whom he had occasion to live in the course of his life.

*BLOOD FOR BLOOD**

During the last field exercises of our Guards regiment, we went hunting beyond the Narva, and on the seashore I came upon an ancient stone cross; farther away there was an abandoned mill and there I saw a mill-stone made from a tombstone with a knight's emblem on it... and, finally, the ruins of a castle, looming over a gully through which ran a stream. All this incited my curiosity and I turned for answer to one of our Captains, who was notoriously keen on historical facts and ancient legends. He had already found out everything about this castle from the local pastor, and when about five of us had gathered together that evening he told us what he had learnt, as I have rendered it here.

A. Bestuzhev.

Many, many years ago there stood a castle here, called Eisen Castle, meaning iron castle. And in truth it was so fabulously solid that mere words failed to describe it; everyone said that the name could not have suited it better. The walls were so high that to see the top necks had to be craned and hats rolled off, and none of the finest archers could shoot an arrow as high as the dome of the keep. The gully served the castle as a moat on one side, and on the other side ran a ditch, which thousands of poor Estonians had been kept digging all through the two-week lent before Assumption, digging till underground springs gushed forth. And so there was no approaching the castle from any side, protected as it was by the moat. And the gates were something else again. Made of solid oak they were and studded with nails no worse than the soles of a Russian foot travel-

ler's boots; there were umpteen latches and locks securing them, and no counting the whiskered sentries standing guard. Each merlon had an iron spike on top, and even the grates were fitted so carefully that a mouse could not slip in or out without leave. One would think why build such strongholds if you intended to live at peace with your neighbours? Truth to tell, peace in those days could be worse than wars nowadays. Give a friendly shake with one hand and strike with the other,—and the fat would be in the fire. And whoever won was judged right. However, those knights were nobody's fools either. When they got people to build those castles for them they said it was to defend them from foreign invaders, but once they had the castles built and had ensconced themselves in those eagles' nests it turned out that what they wanted was to sally forth on raids themselves. That's what the owner of this castle did—Baron Bruno von Eisen, his name was. He was by no means the meekest of his fellows who, it must be said, were notorious even beyond the sea for their boldness. When he barked: "To horse!" his braves would leap into their saddles, and woe to the man who rode out last. If the Baron had his sword strapped to his belt, and the sword was said to weigh all of a pood, none would venture to ask him where they were bent. Just dash headlong after him, that's all. He always wore armour of blued steel, dark like the nights in autumn, and was encased in it from head to heel; he looked out at the world only through the eye-slits in the bascinet, and his glance, it was said, was so malignant and piercing that it killed swallows in flight, and when someone driving along the road heard his whistling he'd hasten to turn off—be he a bishop or brother to the *Landmeister*, and give the band as wide a berth as he could.

There were enemies galore for the braves: there were many neighbours and even more pretexts for picking a quarrel with them. And besides, the Narva was only thirty versts away, and beyond it stretched the Russian lands, so tempting with the promise of loot. A bird in the hands of others is worth two in one's own. And so, when this Baron got bored with sitting and drinking, he'd rush to the Russian border. He needed neither bridge nor ford. He'd come galloping up to the edge of a cliff, at the foot of which the river

roared and howled like a savage beast, and what d'you think? He'd yell: "Follow me, lads! " and jump down first. Those who swam out were lucky, those who were drowned were good riddance. He'd only say, shaking himself like a dog: "The swine." And forget them. It was all very well for him to be so reckless. The stallion he rode was of a foreign breed, black as pitch. In a hunt the Baron killed hares from it in full gallop. In a chase, a river was never too wide, a fence never too high to jump, and in a fray he was the very devil—neighing and breathing fire, biting with his teeth and striking with his hoofs. The Baron really loved and cherished this horse: he fed him with choice grain from his pockets, treated him to mead from his own goblet, and if the horse got him out of a tight corner he'd gallop on a little way and then pour his flask of wine down the steed's throat. The horse would choke a bit, give himself a shake, and fly on, cutting sparks with his shoes. Well then, the Baron would ride far into Russia, and take people unawares. When he sighted a village, he called for torches, and once all the houses were ablaze he ordered everything to be thrown into the fire, that is, whatever could not be carried off. Cut down anyone who put up a resistance, and into the fire with anyone who screamed! As often as not they killed needlessly, for sport, but the Baron would say that it was to keep in practice and polish their skill. When they'd had their fill of fun, they'd load the loot on the horses, seat the beauties on their saddles, tie the prisoners to their stirrups, ride back home, and, once there, they'd divide up the loot and abandon themselves to an orgy of revelling and feasting. Never mind if it was a Friday, never mind how late was the hour. The drinking, the bawling of songs, and the clamour would go on for a whole week. Needless to say, it was not every time that our Baron caught the Russians unawares. Often enough he was compelled to turn tail, but he only snarled like a wolf and came out of the skirmish without a scratch, for none ventured too close and no arrow could pierce his armour. There was talk that his armour was charmed, and that might, well be true, because the Baron had spent years pottering with Egyptian magicians, I mean when the knights went to the end of the world to fight among themselves for the Holy Grail. Be that as it may, it

was only bruises he received and never a wound, whereas when he struck someone a blow with his sword it was the priest who had to be called, not a doctor. Needless to say his hand would shrink after one of these reckless raids, but the loose living and the greed for loot was a magnet that drew new rogues into his service, although everyone knew about the hazards and the Baron's ruthlessness. Say, a servant or an armour-bearer of a neighbouring knight had been stealing or doing some other mischief, he'd flee to Baron Eisen at the first smell of retribution. All his past sins were forgotten and buried under the Baron's emblem, but thereafter the man had to keep on his toes. Let him hang back for a moment from fear or miss out on something, and before he knew it he'd be swinging from the nearest post in place of a lamp with a rope round his neck to keep him warm. But then, of course, the men who rallied round the Baron were a holy terror—devil-may-care fellows, every one to a man. They'd jump into fire or water at his word... He only had to blink and all hell would be unleashed. In comparison with them the most hardened dragoon would seem a blushing maiden, and twelve Kiev witches could not have invented all those curses which these braves spat out as they sat round a bowl of punch. Frightening of aspect and ragged of clothes, albeit always carrying a sword and wearing a metal helmet on their heads, they entered the cottages of the Estonians at will, beat up the menfolk to pass the time, pawed their daughters, and collected what levy they could from the wives.

Nowadays the Livonian landowners have turned parsimonious, they keep their larders under lock and key, and put their stomachs on a diet. But in the old days, it was not like that at all! It was holiday fare the year round, roast geese came in flocks, and it did not have to be *heilige Nacht* for the calves and lambs to walk about the table on their own four feet and smilingly offer their steaks to anyone who fancied them. There was no such flippant thing as sandwiches in those days, and only servants were fed with greens. It goes without saying that beverages with a proper body to them were not spared either, and to watch those men drink you'd honestly think that they had tinned insides! A pail of beer per head—and they wouldn't bat an eyelid. The

Baron would be drinking with his neighbours, and the more he drank, the more he strutted. "I'm this, and I'm that, and who says I'm not?" He was the bravest, and he was the noblest, there was none to hold a candle to him. And if he caught someone looking at him askance, he'd start cursing and quarreling, and the next thing there'd be sword play. Sometimes a guest who had arrived on horseback would be carried out on a stretcher, and he'd be lucky if he lost only an ear or his nose, because very often he'd be cured from toothache forever. But that was nothing; if the Baron got really angry at a neighbour he'd go on a raid with his entire household and his dogs, trampling the victim's fields and setting fire to his woods. God forbid crossing his path at that black hour! If he saw an Estonian from afar, he'd gallop to him with his sword raised, and yell:

"Recite the 'Credo', you heathen! "

The man would collapse to his knees, more dead than alive. He didn't understand a word of German, you know.

"I don't understand," he would mumble in Estonian.

"Recite, I tell you! "

"I don't understand..."

"Alright, you pighead of a heathen! I'll christen you! "

Swish went the sword, and there went the poor chap's head bouncing along the road like a skittle ball, and the Baron would gallop on, roaring with laughter and repeating: "absolvo te", because, being holy knights, they could both destroy a man's body and save his immortal soul. That's how they treated aliens, but then how about their own people?

The Baron would take a fancy to a peasant's horse, and right away he'd demand:

"Hey, you, give me your horse in exchange for my blind bitch."

"But, my lord, hunting's not for the likes of us, and what good I'll be without my horse?"

"You'll be good for the gallows! You ought to be happy that I'm allowing you to adopt that bitch's pups, and that your wife will suckle a pair of them for me."

The poor chap would burst into tears, and shuffle home to his cold cottage and his empty bowl. That is, if he wasn't given a beating for weeping. In short, Bruno was a match for

his fellows in oppressing people, and there was only one commandment he did not break, and this was: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's ass," for the simple reason that there were no donkeys in Estonia in those days. And yet, there were hours when he was prey not to fear of God, no, I can't call it that, but to human timidity. Behind him there were years of reckless living, and nothing much to look forward to. And however much he loved rowdiness and violence, nevertheless boredom would get into his saddle with him and onto his chair unasked, and stare at him from the bottom of his emptied goblet. It was only rarely that he was able to squeeze some laughter out, for laughing, as everyone knows, is given only to kind-hearted people.

Well, our Baron was now past forty, but age doesn't make a sage, alas. Once, when he was holding a most friendly discourse with his glass of wine, hoping to get some sense from it, the thought suddenly struck him that he ought to marry, maybe it would dispel his boredom; besides, there would be heirs ... after all, there was no harm in trying. There were girls in plenty, he could just take his choice, but then why bother to choose, the best thing was to take the one already betrothed to his nephew: she was not poor, and she'd make as good a housewife as any other. True, she may not come to love him, but that was the least of his worries. After all he didn't care if fish liked him or not, he liked to eat fish, and that's all that mattered. And as for his nephew, he was small fry, let him grow a bit before he married! I've got to tell you that this nephew was the son of the Baron's cousin, a Westphalian knight in his own right. This late cousin was rich in gold but evidently not in brains, seeing that he entrusted his son and his fortune to Bruno. It was sinful the way Bruno made free with the money as if it were his own, and as for the boy himself, Reginald his name was, Bruno treated him not like a flesh-and-blood nephew at all and taught him the very things which a young lad should not know. However, the boy's innate goodness saved him from following his uncle's bad example, or perhaps I should say that the very infamy of the example and his uncle's iron fist made an even better person of him, for they showed him all the foulness of a wicked man and all the advantages of being good. He was a tall, handsome lad, and

he went and fell in love with the daughter of a certain Baron, and her name was ... let me remember, Louisa, I believe. This Louisa was like a rose in bloom, with blushing cheeks and skin whiter than first snow, for all that she did not bathe in butter milk or sleep with creamed gloves on like the local young ladies... A heart hears another heart's call, and they fell in love. They made a good match, none better... Bruno didn't mind, her father gave his consent, and suddenly, out of a clear, blue sky, trouble swooped down on them like a hawk.

What the Baron decided to do, he did. He did not like to have his decisions questioned, and so if you did not want to be thrown out of the window you did not stick your neck out crossing him. After riding hard for three days, Reginald and two buglers arrived at the castle of this Knight Bock, and stopping before the drawbridge young Reginald blew his horn as alarmingly as if two dozen bears were after him. There was a great to-do in the castle at the sight of these visitors, dressed up in their gaudiest finery, like parrots. The old Baron was so flustered that he put his boot fringe round his neck; his lady blackened her lips instead of her eyebrows; and Louisa herself, unconcerned though she tried to appear, came down to welcome the visitors in two different shoes—it was told me for the honest truth. The funereal look on Reginald's face greatly surprised the Bock family, but when he delivered his uncle's proposal they were aghast—a bomb falling on their tea table would have frightened them less. Honestly, it's a pity there were no bombs yet in those days, an inapt comparison, I admit. The father, shaking his head, computed the might of the wooer on his fingers; the mother, while swearing that she would not let her daughter marry a cutthroat, gabbled notwithstanding about wedding gowns; Louisa sobbed her heart out, and the pale matchmaker, demoted from the rank of husband-to-be, stood before them with a stricken look, cursing his uncle whom he hated for making mock of him by sending him, of all people, to his betrothed with a proposal of marriage. Say what may, but the reins which control people are woven from iron and gold. Everyone is either too scared of the former, or too fond of the latter. And that is what decided Louisa's father and mother, once they thought the matter

over. Bruno was not to be trifled with. And willy-nilly the parents gave their consent. In those days, daughters were not asked, and really why pamper them? What had it to do with them? Sweet wine was served, and the health of the affianced couple drunk. I don't know why, but this sweet wine tasted like pepper to Reginald, Louisa's mother choked over it, and Louisa willed herself to swallow a few drops, mixed with her tears. Reginald rushed out madly, leapt into his saddle and galloped home with the happy message for his uncle and bitterness in his own heart.

The wedding was held two weeks later. The guests arrived in droves, for in those days too people loved to feast at someone else's expense. Just let the bottles clink, and watch through the window to see the carriages roll up one after the other as if in answer to a summons. Ah well, those barons of old didn't have to brew their beer or make their wine themselves; and their food they did not buy either. Especially our Baron: his catch of golden-scaled fish with a Russian brand on them never ran out, just as the wildfowl and animals he bagged.

Well, the bride and groom were taken to the church with all the German frillings. The groom stood at the altar, stroking his beard, grunting very proudly, shifting his weight from one leg to the other like a crane. Poor Louisa looked like a shadow of herself, her face as white as Flemish linen, and she answered: "I do" so indistinctly, so unwillingly that it was worth ninety-six "I do not's". The guests in the meantime, particularly the ladies in their huge crinolines, in which they sat like flowers in a basket, whispered behind their fans, sniggering at the ill-matched couple.

"A husband is not a beaver," said a baroness to the lady sitting next to her. "It's only fur that costs more if it's silvered."

"Only sickly plants sprout in furrows like his," some joker added.

"We'll live and see whether the dove pecks out the old raven's eyes, or the raven plucks out all her feathers," some reasoned.

However, there's no listening to what everyone said. True to custom, the feasting went on till morning. Cloud-berry, ashberry, wormwood and various innocent herb vod-

kas flowed in rivers, and foreign wines were also served in plenty.

Morning found the revellers either at the table or under the table, and to the disappointment of those who fancied the old customs best, the feast ended quite peaceably, except for some smashed plates and bleeding noses. The guests refreshed themselves with hot beverages, and with jocose wishes to the newlyweds, departed. And when they all left, the castle became as quiet as a cemetery after a great funeral. The young Baroness, left for the first time in her life without the support of her father and mother, huddled in a corner, with trepidation in her heart ... and that could not bode well, of course. She started at the sound of her husband's jingling spurs. Because she had heard so many frightening stories about his ferocity, she all but swooned when he kissed her lest he meant to suck out her blood, and when he fondled her she imagined that he was reaching for her neck to strangle her.

It's bad enough living with a kind, though unloved man, so you can judge for yourself what it must have been like to be tied for life to that Baron, a beast both in temper and in appearance. Poor Louisa wept on the quiet all the time: at night she cried into her pillow which could be wrung out by morning, and in the daytime she watered her needlework with tears. Once she asked her husband to let her go home on a visit, to pay her respects to her parents. Not a hope! God forbid! My, how he stamped his feet and shouted: "Your home is the bed chamber! You'll be good enough to stay at home and spin, my dear madam, and not go gallivanting all over the place. And what is the meaning of your tears with which you spangle your needlework? And why, when I come near you, does your face turn so sour that it corrodes the armour on me? Yet you stare very sweetly at my nephew. I'll be damned if I don't smell a rat! You're both remembering the past, I'll wager. Just you bear in mind, Louisa, that I've some nice, cooling cellars where I can lock you up forever like a bottle of Hungarian wine, so you don't turn bad."

An unjust suspicion always leads one into temptation, and that's no invention of ours. As a rule, the falsely accused says to himself: "I'll just as well earn the blame, since

I'm blamed anyway. After all, I've nothing to lose." And vengeance is sweet, besides.

It was like that, or nearly like that with Louisa and Reginald. At first they felt wronged, and then were angered by the Baron's constant reproaches, cursing and jealous threats. What is more, Louisa did not love her husband, Reginald did not respect his uncle, and so nothing deterred them from giving way to the love they once felt. And whoever you share your sorrow with, you'll soon be sharing your joy with as well, you're together, and that's enough. And the moment the coast was clear, he came and sat by her side, whispering sweet nothings and gazing into her eyes so tenderly that even a heart of stone would melt. Or else he regaled her with funny stories and danced attention on her, while he himself pined with longing for her, and wasted away like a candle. Why wonder that Reginald became dearer to Louisa with every day, her husband more hateful, and she the guiltier? The Baron, for his part, no longer bothered with any niceties. Often now he left the castle before the break of day with his band to raid or rob, and as for his wife—he greeted her with abuse and parted from her with threats. How could he compare with Reginald, kind, noble Reginald! However, God forbid that I should make any excuses for them. Their attachment was reprehensible, there's no gainsaying that. It is a grave sin to deceive a husband and betray an uncle. We cannot help our passions, of course, but then what were we given our soul for if not so we could overcome them? No, she was dead set on Reginald who, too bemused for caution, was himself sticking his neck into the noose. One thing led to another: to keep in his uncle's good graces he had to play up to him, stifling his conscience. He did what he was told: dug up the neighbours' boundary lines, set fire to their fields, or raided villages and killed old and young alike. That's how one sinful intention leads to countless dastardly deeds.

A year passed. The Baron was dining with his guests one day. After dinner, at which much wine was drunk, the whole party proceeded to the "menagerie" to do a bit of archery. Actually, it was simply a fenced-off corner of the back-yard which the Baron, from sheer boastfulness, had given that impressive name. So long as the name was there, what

did the rest matter? Well, in that "menagerie" the only wild animals were crows, unless you counted the nanny goat which was kept tied by the horns, also the old horse, put there to grass in the spare time between hauling the water-cart, and two hogs who came to visit without their keeper's knowledge. Well then, crossbows were brought, and the largest one was handed to the Baron. It was his favourite one. The next thing, he challenged the strong men to draw it. And though everyone tried, no one could do it, and the Baron, watching them, chuckled gleefully. And now it was Reginald's turn. He held the steel crossbow down with a heel, stretched the bow-string with all his might, and everyone gasped hearing the tink-a-link as the bow-string caught. He may have been drawing a toy bow, it was so easy. Reginald had long been getting in his uncle's hair, and the prowess he now displayed made the Baron see red, for until now he alone could brag of such strength.

"That's simply a knack," he sneered. "And now if you, a poppycock of a ladies' man, can do better than toss and catch bread-balls across the table, be a man and hit the miller who's working on the dam over there."

"But, Uncle, I believe you've often seen me hitting a swan," Reginald retorted angrily. "I'm not an executioner to kill one of our own kind! "

"Hm! Your own kind? Truly, the baseness of your feelings inclines me to believe that you *are* one of a kind with those animals... You can't kill a miller ... ha, ha, ha! what's a miller? Oh, you're not going to swoon, are you? Shall I fetch some smelling-salts? You don't like the smell of blood, you'd wallow in attar of roses all the time. The only battle banner you like is a woman's scarf! "

"Baron Bruno ... remember that there are insults which are above family considerations. But if there is a grain of honesty in you besides your venom, you will say whether I was less of a man than you in a fray, and whether, to my shame, I did not spill innocent Russian blood on our raids?"

"Less of a man, indeed! A chicken would gladly not go into the oven, but it's dragged by the cop. Here, give me that crossbow and go, sit behind the stove at the spinning wheel and watch. It'll do you good to see how surely my arrows pierce the hearts of menial people."

He tore the crossbow from Reginald's hands, took aim, and the next instant the poor miller fell dead into the water.

"Good shot! A jolly good shot! " the knights shouted, clapping their hands.

Reginald, already fuming from the insult, now flared up from the sight of such cruelty.

"I'd have shot you, God damned cutthroat, if I had foreseen this, but you shall not escape execution! " he said to the Baron.

"Quiet, saucy brat, or I'll have this iron glove hammered into your mouth... Out of my sight before I whip you with reins like the lowest groom! "

Reginald was so enraged that he could not utter a word, and his rage would have erupted in a deadly stab with the arrow he was holding in his hand, if he had not been seized and tied up.

"Throw him into the dungeon," his uncle snarled. "Let him compose love songs for the voice of the trapped mouse he is. Irons for his wrists and legs, and put him on bread and water! "

The poor young chap was dragged into the dungeon. Louisa's eyes remained red from crying for a whole month, proving what she had been made to suffer on his account, but no one knew what had become of him, and soon he was forgotten. Such things were not unusual in those days.

Well, my dear sirs, not very long after this Bruno, while out hunting, received a message from his braves, who were away searching for loot the way a dachshund ferrets out truffles, that some Russian merchants would be sailing past his castle to Revel with furs for bartering and gold for buying. The chance was too good for the old sinner to pass up.

"Get the boats ready, dress up like fishermen, I'll be with you in a trice," he yelled the order. "We're going to lie in wait for those whiskered sturgeon! "

The Baron was by no means pious, but he was superstitious enough. He had often quarrelled with the pastor in Wesenstein who rebuked him for letting his dog carry his prayer book in its teeth, but at the same time he believed in sorcery and was afraid of goblins, which was why he never

slept without a light in the room. A rat would be rustling under the floorboards, but he'd start up, thinking that someone was approaching with a clatter of armour, and scream at his own shadow: who's there? Naturally, when a man's conscience is bent or marked like a cardsharp's card, it's not in prayer but in fortune-telling that he is compelled to seek comfort. And this is what Bruno had in mind when he spurred his horse and flew over the grass to the forest. The thickets grew ever denser... The evening ever darker... Branches whipped him across the face, but he rode on and on. At last he came to a hut, the kind which stands on chicken legs, shakes in the wind, and turns round when ordered, so the fairy tales say. He banged on the door. "Let me in, granny!" The door was opened by an old Estonian woman, a famous local sorceress and fortune-teller. She had cat's eyes, and her dishevelled hair hung down to her waist. She wore a striped dress and over it were hung all kinds of trinkets, metal discs and pendants, which made her look all the more fearsome. Her voice could hardly be heard above the creaking of the door. There was talk that she could stem blood, that vipers came to her at her bidding, that she knew people's innermost secrets, she could tell what was going to happen to whom, and as for their past it was an open book to her. If someone angered her, he'd be cackling like a hen before he knew it, crowing like a cock, or running about in the guise of a striped piglet.

"What foul wind has brought you here?" she asked, rubbing her eyes which smarted from the smoke of the burning splinter.

"It wasn't the wind, it was my horse that brought me," replied the Baron, dismounting, and doubling over to enter the hut, a model that is still as popular in our day, I'm sorry to say. The sunrays, mingling with the smoke, filtered inside as smoked rays, so to speak. Two holes, which mice had eaten through in the walls, did for windows. In one corner of the hut was a hearth, built of stones with nothing to stick them together, and all the walls were as sooty as the inside of a furnace. There was not a stick of furniture. A piece of matting lay on the floor in the corner, and a broom was propped up beside the hearth. Maybe this broom was her witch's equipage.

"Tell me my fortune, old hag," the Baron shouted the order.

Just then a black cat jumped on to the back of his neck and clawed his whiskers. Startled, he cried: "Shoo! Shoo! " and when he threw it off him, he heard and saw sparks crackling in its fur, and felt chilly all over.

"I know what you want to hear," the witch said with a nasty smile. "When you were chasing the fox you received a message about some easy loot, and now you yourself want to play a foxy game on the sea. I know what has been, I'll divine what will be... But this is the last time, Bruno, the last time."

He broke into a cold sweat on hearing how much was known to her. "The damned witch," he cursed inwardly. In the meantime she had scooped some water with a goat's horn, whispered into it, staring at the water fixedly with her frightening eyes, and then suddenly the water began to hiss and steam. When it had subsided, the witch, trembling all over, slowly uttered in a voice that did not sound like her own:

"Knight Bruno, your campaign will be successful, hasten, do not tarry... You will add new riches and new sins to the old ones... Shiny is your breastplate ... and smooth..."

"I should say it's smooth," Bruno muttered under his breath. "Even a fly would slide off it."

"I see blood on it..." continued the old woman.

"Don't worry, it won't get soaked through."

"No, but it will turn rusty..."

"What d'you think I keep an armour-bearer for? If he doesn't burnish my breastplate, I'll burnish his back! You'd better tell me, granny, will I return home?"

"Home?... Oh yes, you'll come back to where you start from ... and then you'll lie down to sleep under a cross with green branches at the head. Hear the bell? That's a funeral. That's a wedding... Hear them singing: 'Let this soul rest with the saints' and 'Hallelujah! "

A chill ran down the knight's spine. He glanced behind him timorously, listened, but heard only the mewing of the black cat.

"Here's a shilling for you," he said, making for the door, but the witch pushed it back with a hand.

"I'll receive ten of those from you when you come back... Go: your horse and your fate are waiting for you outside."

The Baron galloped off with never a backward glance. "She's crazy," he was thinking. "However, I often sleep under a knight's cloak with a cross on it, and if I return home for All Saints Day there will naturally be birch branches at my head. But what did she mean by that wedding or that funeral? To hell with it. I know so many people, it might be any of them."

In the morning, when the sun rose, the sails of his pirate boats appeared as faint white patches on the sea.

Whether he was away for a long or a short time, whether it was far or near he went, none of that I know. All I do know is that one evening he started up the steep slope to his castle from where the stream falls into the sea. "Well, here I have come back safely," he said to his armour-bearer. "Robert, take these ten shillings to the old witch and tell her that there was a bit of truth in the nonsense she foretold me. Tell her that I'm safe and sound, and as gay as a bird! "

However, it was much too apparent that his gaiety was akin to anxiety. Anyone returning home where he left his wife cannot help the hammering of his heart when he stands at the threshold. Who knows what news are awaiting him, what guests he will find there? The Baron's heart cringed too, and it didn't cringe for nothing: before he had walked more than ten steps along the path he saw...

I must say, gentlemen, that what he saw would have made the blood of the coolest husband boil... The Baron saw his wife sitting close to his nephew, holding hands and kissing. Choking with rage, he stood before the lovers, and they did not even notice him, lost to the world in a paradise, with a sweet little bird singing glory to them. Bruno could not believe his eyes... What! The nephew he had thrown into a dungeon to be starved to death, was here before him and fully armed? And the hypocrite was kissing Louisa who was too modest to lift her eyes in the presence of men? Hell and damnation! No, it wasn't a bad dream, he wasn't under the devil's spell.

He roared and stamped his feet, but if it hadn't been for the jangling of his armour the lovers would have probably

ended their days there and then. At the sound, Reginald jumped to his feet, parried the blow with his own sword, and clashed with his opponent so furiously that sparks went flying. A blow on the head—and Bruno collapsed on the grass.

"You're in my power now, villain," Reginald spoke as he tied the Baron to a tree. "Your end has come. Don't trouble to beg or expect mercy from me, mercy is what you never granted anyone. You taught me to spill innocent blood as your whim took you, so don't be surprised that I want to drink my fill of yours for revenge. Remember how you took away my fortune and my freedom, how you ordered me about, your own nephew bullied like a menial, how you humiliated, hurt and despised me, and how you took away my bride and brought me to this pass, my peace of mind shattered and my once clear conscience in perdition. You villainously destroyed everything that is dear to the soul on earth and precious in heaven... You threw me into the dungeon to starve... You tortured and tormented this angel who saved my life and whom you do not value or deserve. I had to fight it out, what else could I do? Even to right a wrong the Lord forbids one to challenge his uncle. But great is the Lord! And you have fallen, you shall die! "

You ought to have seen the Baron tucking in his tail, grovelling and weeping! Wherever did he learn the words! Begging and whining! But you don't welcome death like a long-lost brother, of course, especially when it takes you unawares with all those sins on your soul.

"Don't bear me malice, be generous, let me go! I'll give you everything you want, I'll do anything you say: I'll hold your stirrup for you, I'll get the Pope to give me a divorce and his dispensation for you to marry Louisa! O Holy Brigitta! I'll donate half of my next loot to the church in Revel, I'll build a convent in your name with both a winter and a summer church! I'll take monastic vows, I'll wear a hairshirt under my armour, I'll give away to the paupers all my honestly and dishonestly acquired possessions! Louisa, you have a kind heart, I've had the benefit of it, I've wronged you, forgive me... Ask, beg, persuade Reginald to let me live a little longer, if only a year, a month, an hour! "

"Not even five minutes! " his nephew replied, drawing

his bow. "The name of the Lord which, villain that you are, you always called upon in vain in order to oppress the poor or wiggle free from the strong, won't help you now! Besides, a man who is such an arrant coward in the face of death, does not deserve to live."

At this, the compassionate young Baroness fell on her knees before her lover and, clutching at his hands, screamed in a piercing voice:

"Don't kill him! He is a villain, but he is my husband, he is your own uncle! "

"Louisa, you don't know what you're asking," Reginald said to her gently. "If he stays alive it will mean certain death for us. Surely you do not want this beast to go on terrorising everyone? He severed ties of blood by throwing me in that dungeon to starve. What pledge of his can you believe after that? But if you want to see me broken on the wheel and dying in horrible agony, and if you yourself want to be slowly burnt to death, just say the word, and he'll live! "

The picture he painted appalled Louisa. A female mind is weak, it sees only that which is before it... She turned away, and waved her hand. The arrow sang... The Baron's heart was pierced, he gave up the ghost ... only his blood spattered his wife and his nephew...

The Baron died—good riddance; he had done wrong; but did his murderers do right? Reginald was an honourable, good chap, so why did he go on raids with his uncle when he knew that it was wicked? To be sure, he did it against his will; but why didn't he have the will power to refuse to go or openly rebel against his uncle? And in the matter of taking the law into his own hands, was he fully justified? After all, he did not stand up for the oppressed so long as he himself suffered no hurt. He rebelled only to save his own life, or maybe even to benefit. Where's the credit in that? Were his reasons so pure that he could hope to have his action justified? True, he rid the district of a villain, but he also gave the district a lesson in crime. Besides, he was really guilty of deceiving his uncle... And for another thing, blood is thicker than water, whatever anyone says.

Soon it was learnt at the castle that the Baron was killed, what for and by whom, God alone knew. The news was

too good to believe. When people saw his dead body with their own eyes, the whole district rejoiced. Everyone hugged and kissed like we, Russians, do at Easter. To be sure there was talk about the murderer, although everyone wanted him not to be found out. The deceased was not liked, as you know, and so only gratitude was due to whoever had despatched him to the nether world. Everyone suspected Robert, the Baron's armour-bearer, who had left the boat together with him and had then vanished into thin air. True, there were some who glanced askance at Reginald, but he directed the funeral arrangements so composedly and pressed food and wine on everyone so assiduously, that very soon these people's minds were changed for them. The Baron was buried. A stone cross was set up on the spot where he was killed, and until a new *Landmeister* was appointed Reginald was ruler of the castle.

Woman's memory is short, and their tears are like dew: they fall as quickly, and dry up as quickly. At first Louisa sobbed her heart out all the time; then she took to praying ... and then to seeking amusement to dispel her sorrow; and finally her conscience was quite lulled by Reginald's caresses and avowals and, incidentally, by her own reasoning. And lo, before a half-year passed, there she was dressed up in bright-coloured gowns and blooming like a rose. Before long, the wedding preparations began. Thanks to the gold donated for the commemoration of the Baron's soul, the Pope's dispensation was duly received. Why tarry then? A great number of guests were invited. They all came and, though they shrugged their shoulders, they stretched their mouths in smiles. And now, the bride and groom were driven in a carriage to the church, not far from the castle. "What a nice couple," the guests said, but this nice couple stood at the altar as though doomed to death. Both were pale, and did not dare look at each other. Some of the guests noticed that Louisa kept rubbing something off her hand, and Reginald started at every squeak of the windows, buffeted by the October wind. Their strange behaviour affected everyone. Faces fell... No one talked or whispered, only the pastor's voice was heard in the silence, the tall, pointed vaults echoing it. All of a sudden something fell off the wall with a clatter, and rolled along the floor;

two of the candles went out. Everyone shuddered in fright. It was the helmet of some knight that had fallen from the wall where it had been hung in memoriam. Quiet descended again, again the organ hummed and fell silent... And then, in the silence, the clatter of hoofs was heard on the very church porch, a voice barked: "Open up! Open up! " and then came a banging on the door that reverberated in the dome... Everyone froze: no one stirred... They glanced upward and saw nothing but a wisp of cloud from the censer. "Open up! " thundered the wrathful voice, and they could hear his horse neighing and beating his hoofs on the stone porch. The door, groaning from the blows, jumped the hinges and fell on the floor. A warrior wearing a blue-steel armour and a white cape with a cross, dashed to the altar on his black steed, flourishing a huge sword and trampling down the terrified guests. His pale face was uncovered, his eyes motionless. It was the dead Baron, everyone recognised him.

People screamed, some fainted, some made for the door. In three leaps Bruno reached the newlyweds. "Blood for blood, murderers! " he roared. A moment—and Reginald wheezed his last, trampled by the horse. A moment—and the dead Baron leaned down, picked up the swooning Louisa, threw her across his saddle, swung his horse round, gave the gathering a glare out of eyes that burnt like coals, and shot out of the church, sparks flying in his wake. That's the last they saw of him. Horror sealed everyone's lips. Crossing themselves, the guests dispersed as quickly as they could.

This happened in October. The wind howled like a hungry wolf in the forest, the sea stormed, the waves assaulted the rocks and bounced back from them. When poor Louisa recovered her senses, she saw that she was lying in the forest on wet grass and a black knight was digging a hole with his sword under the very cross where the murder had been committed. The light of the moon fell straight down upon him. Louisa recognised the pallid, dead face, and fainted away again...

She came to her senses again, poor thing ... she opened her eyes but could not see a thing. She was lying face down with her hands tied behind her, and felt cold earth being heaped over her. Her breath caught, she could not scream...

In despair she could barely murmur: "Lord, have mercy on my soul! "

The fiendish task was finished. She heard loud, infernal laughter, then someone said: "Death for death, traitoress! " and her blood froze. She gave another moan, uttered another scream, and that was all. Louisa suffocated, buried alive.

Horrible! Till this day when I think of a death like that I break out into a cold sweat and my fingernails turn blue. It would seem that Louisa was the least guilty of them, but she suffered the worst. Still, the Lord knows what He is doing. On a man, blood often washes away his earlier sins, but on a woman it's always worse than the brand of Cain. Louisa was punished cruelly, but what happened to her saved many other young women from sin for a long time to come. Say what may, our griefs disappear in the face of the holy truth, and good sprouts from evil and blossoms.

The next morning an avenger in black armour arrived at the castle. This was Bruno's brother who resembled him like a twin. He had been knocking about the world, he had been to Palestine in the retinue of some German princeling or other, and had returned home with outlandish vices for his only wealth. It so happened that Bruno's armour-bearer, who had unwittingly witnessed the murder, encountered this brother, after he had run away in fear from his new master.

Bruno's brother, as we have seen, avenged him.

He was appointed heir to all the Baron's property. The savagery of his vengeance, however, did not go unpunished. About ten years later, the Russians crossed the borders of Estonia, laid siege to Eisen Castle, and roasted the Black Barons. When the castle had burnt down, they ploughed up the land where the keep once stood. Long, long afterwards, and long before now, pious people collected the stones and built a church close by to the glory of God. You can see the dome above those trees.

Translated by Olga Shartse

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

(1799–1837)

Alexander Pushkin holds a special place in Russian literature and in the spiritual development of the Russian nation. Pushkin expressed the thoughts and feelings of the finest people of his day, and defined the course along which Russian literature was to go in the following decades. Such great writers as Nikolai Gogol, Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky owe a great deal to Pushkin's prophetic genius.

Pushkin was killed in a duel by Georges d'Anthes, a French émigré in the service of Nicholas I. The poet's sympathies with the day's progressive ideas, his freedom-loving thoughts and his independent spirit brought him into collision with the aristocratic society in which he moved and which now joined forces in hounding him. Pushkin's wife was compromised and he challenged d'Anthes to a duel. On the order of Nicholas I, the coffin with Pushkin's body was secretly removed from St. Petersburg in the night to be buried near Mikhailovskoye, his family estate, where he had spent the best years of his life in exile.

Pushkin's work was amazing in its diversity of genres: lyric verses,

"Eugene Onegin", a novel in verse, prose stories "Dubrovsky", "The Captain's Daughter", "The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin", travel notes "A Journey to Arzrum", short tragedies "Feast During the Plague", "The Stone Guest", and "The Miserly Knight", a historical drama "Boris Godunov", children's tales, "A History of the Pugachev Mutiny", an unfinished novel "Peter the Great's Blackamoor", to give only a summary of works whose importance in the development of Russian literature was truly invaluable. Nikolai Gogol wrote: "None of our poets is higher than Pushkin, and none can now be called a national poet, for the right to that title definitely belongs to him."

For Hermann in "The Queen of Spades", a nobody, money was the sole means of attaining the position in society which he believed he had a perfect right to by virtue of his "exclusiveness". Hermann, with the profile of a Napoleon and the soul of a Mephistopheles, cared little what happened to either the old Countess or her poor ward Liza. To achieve his aim he was prepared to play god. Like thousands of big and small Napoleons, he suffered a fiasco, for such is the moral law of life.

THE QUEEN OF SPADES

*The Queen of Spades stands
for secret enmity.*

Latest Fortunetelling Book

I

*On a cold winter day
They would gather and play,
Smoking,*

*And many a stake
Those youngsters would make,
Joking.*

*Of the stakes that they won
They chalked up every one
Paying,*

*And so, many a day
They would squander away,
Playing.*

Card-playing was going on in the quarters of Narumov, an officer in the Horse Guards. The long winter night passed imperceptible; it was five in the morning when they sat down to supper. Those who had won, plied their forks eagerly; the rest sat in front of their empty plates with an air of abstraction. But champagne was set on the table, the talk became lively, and all took part in it.

"How did you get on, Surin?" asked the host.

"Lost as usual. It must be admitted that I am unlucky. I play for low stakes, I never get excited, always keep my head, and yet I lose all the time."

"And are you never tempted? Don't you ever long to raise the stakes on a card? Your firmness amazes me."

"Look at Hermann!" said one of the guests, pointing to a young officer from an engineer regiment. "Never picked up a card in his whole life, never doubled a stake, and sits beside us till five o'clock, watching us play!"

"I take a great interest in cards," said Hermann, "but I am not in a position to sacrifice what is necessary in the hope of gaining what is superfluous."

"Hermann's a Teuton, and therefore cautious—that's all!" remarked Tomsky. "Now, my grandmother, Countess

Anna Fedotovna— she's an enigma, if there ever was one."

"What? What's that?" cried the guests.

"I can't understand," continued Tomskey, "how it is that my grandmother never gambles."

"What is there remarkable about an eighty-year-old woman not wanting to gamble?" said Narumov.

"D'you mean to say you don't know anything about her?"

"Nothing whatsoever. Upon my word! "

"Then let me tell you.

"You must know that my grandmother, sixty years ago, visited Paris and was all the fashion there. People followed her about to have a look at *la Vénus moscovite*; Richelieu paid her court, and my grandmother vows that her cruelty almost drove him to suicide.

"In those days ladies used to play faro. One day, while playing cards at court, she incurred a debt of honour for a great sum of money to the Duc d'Orléans. When she got home, my grandmother, while removing the patches from her face, and undoing her panniers, recounted her losses to my grandfather, and ordered him to pay up.

"My late grandfather, as far as I can remember, was a kind of steward to my grandmother. He feared her like the plague; but when he heard of such appalling losses he flew into a rage, took up the abacus and proved to her that they had spent half a million during the last six months, that they had no Moscow or Saratov estates in the neighbourhood of Paris, and flatly refused to pay. My grandmother gave him a box on the ear, and banished him from her bedroom, as a token of her disfavour.

"The next day she sent for her husband, hoping that the domestic chastisement would have had its effect on him, but she found him adamant. For the first time in their married life she condescended to argument and explanations. She tried to shame him by pointing out condescendingly that there were debts and debts, and that there was a difference between a prince and a coachmaker. Useless! My grandfather rebelled. He said no, and that his 'no' was final. My grandmother was at her wits' end.

"Among her intimates was a very remarkable individual. You have heard of Comte Saint Germain, of whom such

extraordinary tales are told. You know he gave himself out to be the Eternal Jew, the discoverer of the elixir of life and the philosopher's stone, and so on. People laughed at him as a charlatan, and Casanova wrote in his memoirs that he was a spy; despite his mysterious reputation, however, Germain had a most respectable appearance and knew how to make himself agreeable in society. My grandmother loves him to distraction to this day, and will not allow him to be spoken of disrespectfully. She knew Germain had a great amount of money at his disposal, and, deciding to have recourse to his aid, sent him a note asking him to come to her at once.

"The old eccentric responded to her summons immediately and found my grandmother overcome with grief. She painted in the darkest colours her husband's cruelty, and ended by declaring that her only hope was in Germain's friendship and chivalry.

"Germain pondered. 'I could let you have this sum,' he said, 'but I know you would never have any peace until you had paid me back, and I should not like to cause you fresh cares. There is another means—you can win it back.'

" 'But my dear Count,' replied my grandmother, 'I tell you we have no money at all.' 'You will not need money,' said the Count. 'Be so kind as to hear me out.' And he told her a secret which any one of us would pay dear to know..."

The youthful gamblers redoubled their attention. Tomsy lit his pipe, inhaled the smoke, and continued:

"That same night my grandmother appeared at Versailles, *au jeu de la Reine*. The Duc d'Orléans dealt. My grandmother gave some slight apology for not having brought the money for her debt, inventing a little story in her justification, and began playing against him. She selected three cards, which she played one after another—all three proved to be winning cards, and my grandmother won back the whole of her debt."

"A mere fluke! " said one of the guests.

"A fairy-tale," said Hermann.

"Perhaps the cards were marked," put in another.

"Hardly," replied Tomsy with dignity.

"What! " said Narumov. "You have a grandmother who can play three winning cards running, and you have not yet

been able to discover the secret of these cabalistics! ”

“It’s not so simple, devil take it! ” replied Tomsy. “She had four sons, of whom one was my father. All four were desperate gamblers, and she did not disclose her secret to any of them, although this would have been no bad thing for them—nor for me either, for that matter. But this is what my uncle, Count Ivan Ilyich, told me, on his word of honour. The late Chaplitsky, that same Chaplitsky who died in poverty, having squandered millions, once lost about three hundred thousand rubles in his youth—to Zorich, I think. He was in despair. My grandmother, who was always very hard on the vagaries of young men, for some reason took pity on Chaplitsky. She named three cards to him, which he was to play in succession, but extorted from him the promise, on his word of honour, never to gamble any more. Chaplitsky went to the rooms of his fortunate opponent, and they sat down to the gaming table. Chaplitsky staked fifty thousand on the first card and won, then he doubled and redoubled the stake, and won back his losses, with a generous margin...

“But it’s time to go to bed—it’s a quarter to six.” Indeed it was getting light already—the young men finished what was in their glasses and dispersed.

II

*“Il paraît que monsieur est
décidément pour les suivantes.”*

*“Que voulez-vous, madame?
Elles sont plus fraîches.”*

Society talk

The old Countess was sitting in her dressing-room in front of her mirror. Three serving-maids hovered around her. One held a pot of rouge, another a box of hairpins, and the third a high cap with flame-coloured ribbons. The Countess, who had not the slightest pretensions to beauty, which had long faded, nevertheless preserved all the habits of her youth, adhering strictly to the fashions of the 1770s, and spending as much time and energy over her toilet as she had done

sixty years before. Seated before a tambour at the window was a young lady, the Countess' companion.

"Good morning, Grand'maman!" said a young officer who had just come into the room. "*Bonjour, Mademoiselle Lise*. I have come to ask a favour of you, Grand'maman."

"What is it, Paul?"

"Permit me to introduce a friend of mine to you, and to bring him to your ball on Friday."

"Bring him straight to the ball, you can introduce him to me there. Were you at the***s yesterday?"

"Oh, yes! It was very gay. We danced till five. Eletsкая was exquisite."

"Eh, my dear! What can you see in her? You should have seen her grandmother, the Princess Darya Petrovna! She must be very old now, I suppose—the Princess Darya Petrovna."

"Old?" replied Tomsky absently. "She's been dead these seven years."

The young lady at the window raised her head and made a sign to the young man. He remembered that the death of her contemporaries was always kept from the old Countess, and bit his lip. But the Countess received this information, which was news to her, with the utmost indifference.

"Dead!" she repeated. "And I did not know! We became maids of honour at the same time, and when we were presented, the Empress..."

And the Countess told her story to her grandson for the hundredth time,

"Well, Paul," she said, after a pause. "Now help me to get up. Lise, where's my snuff-box?"

And the Countess retired behind a screen, accompanied by her maids, to finish her toilet. Tomsky remained with the young lady.

"Whom do you wish to introduce to her?" asked Lisaveta Ivanovna in low tones.

"Narumov. Do you know him?"

"No. Is he a military or a civilian?"

"Military."

"An engineer?"

"No. A cavalryman. What made you think he was an engineer?"

The girl gave a short laugh, but answered not a word.

"Paul!" cried the Countess from behind the screen. "Send me a new novel, but not a modern one, if you please."

"What do you mean, Grand'maman?"

"I mean a novel in which the hero strangles neither his father nor his mother, and in which there are no drowned bodies. I have a perfect horror of drowned bodies!"

"There are no such novels nowadays. Unless, of course, you would like a Russian novel."

"Are there any Russian novels? Send me one, Sir, by all means, send me one!"

"I must say good-bye to you, Grand'maman. I am pressed for time. Good-bye, Lisaveta Ivanovna. What made you think Narumov was an engineer?"

And Tomsy went out of the dressing-room.

Lisaveta Ivanovna remained alone—she turned from her embroidery and began looking out of the window. Very soon a young officer made his appearance round the corner on the other side of the street. A blush covered her cheeks; she took up her work again, bending her head low over the canvas. Just then the Countess reappeared, fully dressed.

"Order the carriage, Lisanka," she said. "We'll go for a drive."

Lise rose from the embroidery frame and began putting away her work.

"Are you deaf, Child?" cried the Countess. "Order the carriage instantly!"

"Yes, Grand'maman," said the girl softly, and went quickly into the entrance hall.

A servant entered with some books for the Countess from Prince Pavel Alexandrovich.

"Very good. Give him my thanks," said the Countess. "Lise! Lise! Where are you going?"

"To dress."

"There's plenty of time, Child! Stay where you are! Open the first volume. Read to me..."

The girl picked up the book and read a few lines.

"Louder!" said the Countess. "What's the matter with you, my dear? Have you lost your voice? Wait a minute—give me a footstool. Nearer, can't you?"

Lisaveta Ivanovna read two more pages. The Countess yawned.

"Put the book down," she said. "A lot of nonsense! Send it back to Prince Pavel with my thanks. Well, where's the carriage?"

"The carriage is ready," said Lisaveta Ivanovna, glancing out of the window.

"And why aren't you dressed?" said the Countess. "You always keep me waiting. It's intolerable, my dear! "

Lise ran to her room. Before two minutes had passed the Countess began ringing her bell with all her might. The three maids came running in at one door, and the footman at the other.

"Can't you come when you're called?" exclaimed the Countess. "Tell Lisaveta Ivanovna I'm waiting for her."

Lisaveta Ivanovna came in, in her cloak and hat.

"At last! " said the Countess. "How you're dressed up! What for, I wonder? Whom do you want to conquer? What's the weather like? It seems to be windy."

"Not at all, Your Highness. It's very still weather," replied the footman.

"You always say the first thing that comes into your head. Open the *fortochka*. * There, I knew there was a wind, and a very cold one, too! Send away the carriage. We're not going, Lise. You needn't have dressed yourself up."

"And this is my life! " thought Lisaveta Ivanovna.

Indeed, Lisaveta Ivanovna was a most unhappy creature. The bread of charity is bitter, said Dante, and the steps to a stranger's house are steep, and who knows that bitterness so well as a poor girl dependent on an aristocratic old dame? The Countess did not really have a bad disposition, but she was capricious, like all women who have once been the spoilt darlings of society, and she was stingy, completely absorbed in her cold selfishness, like all old people who, having expended their tenderer emotions during a long lifetime, feel that they do not belong to the present. She participated in all the vanities of high society, dragging herself to balls, where, seated in a corner, rouged and dressed according to the fashion of ancient days, she was the hideous and essential ornament of the ballroom; newly-arrived guests went up to her and bowed low, as though

*Small ventilation pane in window. —Tr.

in obedience to an established ritual, after which nobody took any notice of her. In her own home she received the whole town, observing the strictest etiquette, though she did not recognise any of her guests. Her innumerable household, growing fat and grey in her service, did whatever they liked and vied with one another in plundering the dying old woman. Lisaveta Ivanovna was a domestic martyr. She poured out tea and was scolded for the waste of sugar; she read novels aloud and was held guilty for all the author's shortcomings; she accompanied the old lady on her drives, and had to answer for the weather and the state of the road. She was allotted a salary which she never received in full; and was expected to be dressed like everyone else, which is to say like very few. In society she played the most pitiable role. Everyone knew her and no one took any notice of her; at balls, she only danced when a *vis-à-vis* was needed, and the ladies took her arm whenever they had to retire in order to set to rights some detail of their toilet. Sensitive and therefore fully alive to her position, she was always on the lookout for a deliverer. But the young men, vain and calculating, did not honour her with their attention, although Lisaveta Ivanovna was infinitely more attractive than the cold, arrogant maidens upon whom they danced attendance. How many times, noiselessly departing from the dull, luxurious drawing-room, did she retire to weep in her humble chamber, with its wall-papered screen, its chest of drawers, its little mirror and painted bedstead, where a tallow candle in a brass candlestick burned dimly.

Once—a day or two after the evening described in the beginning of this tale, and a week before the scene just enacted—Lisaveta Ivanovna, seated before her tambour at the window, happened to glance into the street, and caught sight of a young man in the uniform of an engineer regiment standing motionless, his eyes fixed on her window. She lowered her head and resumed her work; five minutes later she looked out again—the young officer was still there. Not being in the habit of flirting with passing officers, she stopped looking out of the window and went on stitching for another two hours or so without raising her head. Dinner was served. Rising, she began to put away her tambour and, glancing out of the window, observed that

the officer was still there. This struck her as somewhat strange. After dinner she went to the window with uneasy feelings, but the officer was no longer there—and she forgot about him...

Two days later, while going out with the Countess to get into the carriage, she saw him again. He was standing right at the porch, his beaver collar turned up to hide his face—a pair of black eyes gleamed from beneath his cap. Lisaveta Ivanovna was alarmed, she knew not why, and seated herself in the carriage with inexplicable trepidation.

As soon as she returned home she ran to the window—the officer was standing in his former place, his eyes fixed on her; she moved away, tortured by curiosity and an agitation which was quite new to her.

From that time, not a day passed without the young man appearing beneath the windows of their house at a certain hour. A curious relationship sprang up between them. While seated at her work she would feel his approach and raise her head, her glance resting on him for a longer space of time every day. The young man seemed to be beholden to her for this; with the keen sight of youth, she saw the instant blush which covered his pale cheeks whenever their eyes met. A week later, and she was greeting him with a smile...

When Tomsy asked permission to introduce his friend to the Countess, the poor girl's heart began to beat. But when she learned that Narumov was not an engineer but a horse-guardsman she regretted that, by her indiscreet question, she had given away her secret to the volatile Tomsy.

Hermann was the son of a Russianised German who had left him a very small fortune. Firmly convinced of the necessity of consolidating his independence, Hermann did not even touch the interest from it, and lived exclusively on his pay, never allowing himself the slightest indulgences. He was, however, reserved and ambitious, and his comrades seldom had occasion to laugh at his excessive thriftiness. He was a man of strong passions and a fiery imagination, but his firmness of character saved him from the usual errors of youth. Thus, while by nature a gambler, he never played cards, calculating that his fortune was not such as to allow him (to use his own words) *to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of gaining the superfluous*, and yet he would

sit beside the gaming tables all night long, following with feverish excitement the vicissitudes of the game.

The story of the three cards affected his imagination powerfully, and he could not get it out of his head all night. "Supposing," he said to himself, roaming the streets of Petersburg the next night, "supposing the old Countess were to reveal her secret to me? Supposing she were to tell me the names of those three infallible cards? Why should I not try my luck? Present myself to her, get into her favour—perhaps become her lover... but all this would take time, and she is eighty-seven, she might die next week, the day after tomorrow! And the story itself—is it to be believed? No! Caution, moderation and diligence—these are my three faithful cards, with these I will treble my fortune, increase it seven-fold, achieve tranquillity and independence."

Thus meditating, he found himself in one of the principal streets of Petersburg, before a house of ancient architecture. The street was thronged with carriages, which were still rolling up one after another to the brilliantly lighted porch. The slender foot of some young belle, a jackboot with jingling spurs, the striped stocking and the slipper of an ambassador, were thrust in rapid succession from the carriage doors. Furred mantles and cloaks flashed past the majestic footman. Hermann came to a standstill.

"Whose house is this?" Hermann asked the gendarme at the corner.

"The Countess'," replied the latter.

Hermann was thrown into trepidation. The marvellous story again rose before the eye of his fancy. He began walking up and down in front of the house, thinking of its mistress and her miraculous power. It was late when he returned to his humble dwelling; he lay awake a long time, and when sleep overcame him he dreamt of cards, the baize-covered table, heaps of notes, piles of golden coins. He staked one card after another, firmly doubled the stakes, won repeatedly, scraped the gold towards him, pocketed the notes. He awoke late, sighing for the loss of his fantastic riches, and once more went to the city, once more found himself in front of the Countess' mansion. It was as if some mysterious force had drawn him to it. He stood still and looked up at the windows. Behind one of them he saw a

dark head bent either over a book or work. The head was lifted. Hermann saw youthful face and black eyes. This moment decided his fate.

III

*Vous m'écrivez, mon ange, des
lettres de quatre pages plus vite
que je ne puis les lire.*

Correspondence

Hardly had Lisaveta Ivanovna taken off her cloak and hat, when the Countess sent for her and ordered the carriage to be brought round again. And so they went out of the house to get into it. Just at the moment when two footmen were half-lifting, half-pushing the old dame through the carriage door, Lisaveta Ivanovna saw her engineer standing close to the wheels. He seized her hand; she was almost stupefied with terror; the young man vanished—a letter remained in her hand. She hid it inside her glove and neither saw nor heard anything during the whole drive. It was the Countess' habit to fire off question after question when in the carriage—Who's that, just gone by? What bridge is that? What's written on that sign? This time Lisaveta Ivanovna answered at random, and her meaningless remarks angered the Countess.

"What's come over you, my dear? Don't you hear me, or is it that you don't understand what I say?.. I don't lisp, thank the Lord, and I am still in possession of my wits! "

Lisaveta Ivanovna in very truth was not listening. As soon as she got back she hastened to her room and drew the missive out of her glove—it was unsealed. Lisaveta Ivanovna ran her eyes over it. The letter contained professions of love: it was tender and respectful, copied word-for-word from a German novel. But Lisaveta Ivanovna, who did not know German, was enchanted with the letter.

The letter she had received nevertheless caused her excessive agitation. It was the first time she had entered upon secret, intimate relations with a young man. His audacity appalled her. She reproached herself with in-

discreet behaviour, and could not make up her mind what to do. Should she stop sitting at the window and cool the officer's desire for further pursuit by displaying indifference? Ought she to send him back his letter, or, perhaps, answer it coldly and decisively? There was no one for her to consult—she had neither friends nor counsellors. Lisaveta Ivanovna made up her mind to reply.

She sat down at her little writing-table, got out pen and paper, and fell to musing. She began her letter several times, tearing it up each time—her words seemed to her either too indulgent, or too severe. At last she succeeded in writing a few lines with which she was satisfied: "I am confident," she wrote, "that your intentions are honourable, and that you would not wish to insult me by a thoughtless act; but our acquaintance must not begin in this wise. I return you your letter and trust that in future I shall have no cause to complain of unmerited disrespect."

The next day, as soon as she saw Hermann approaching, Lisaveta Ivanovna rose from her tambour, went into the adjoining room, opened the *fortochka* and tossed her letter out of the window, relying on the young officer's dexterity. Hermann ran to the spot where the letter had fallen, picked it up and entered the shop of a pastry cook. Breaking the seal, he found his own letter and the reply of Lisaveta Ivanovna. It was what he had expected and he went home deeply absorbed in his intrigue.

Three days after this, a sharp-eyed girl from a milliner's shop brought Lisaveta Ivanovna a note.

Lisaveta Ivanovna opened it anxiously, fearing it might be a dun, when she suddenly recognised Hermann's handwriting.

"You've made a mistake, Child," she said. "This note is not for me."

"It is, it is! It's for you," answered the bold girl, not troubling to conceal a sly smile. "Be so good as to read it."

Lisaveta Ivanovna ran her eye hastily over the note. Hermann demanded a rendez-vous.

"You must be mistaken, my girl," said Lisaveta Ivanovna, alarmed both by the precipitancy of the demand, and the means employed by Hermann. "This letter is probably not intended for me." And she tore it into fragments.

"If it's not for you then why did you tear it up?" said the shop-girl. "I could have given it back to the person who sent it."

"I would ask you not to bring me any more notes in the future, Child," said Lisaveta Ivanovna, flushing at the girl's remark. "And tell the person who sent you that he ought to be ashamed of himself..."

But Hermann did not desist from his efforts. Lisaveta Ivanovna received letters from him daily, through various channels. They were no longer translated from German. Hermann wrote them under the inspiration of passion, and used language which was natural to him—his letters expressed both his unwavering desire and the chaos of his unbridled imagination. Lisaveta Ivanovna no longer attempted to return them to him, she revelled in them; she began answering them, and her notes became longer and more tender with every day. At last she threw the following letter out of the window to him:

"There is a ball at the Embassy tonight. The Countess will be there. We shall be there till two o'clock. This would be your chance to see me alone. As soon as the Countess leaves, her servants are sure to go away; there will be only the doorman in the porch, and he usually goes into his own little room. Come at half past eleven. Go straight upstairs. If you find anyone in the hall, ask for the Countess. They'll tell you she isn't at home, and there will be nothing for you to do, but go. But you will probably meet no one. The maids stay in their own room, all together. From the hall, turn to the left and go straight on till you get to the Countess' bedroom. There you will see a screen in front of two little doors. The one on the right leads to the study, where the Countess never goes. The one on the left leads to a passage, from which there is a narrow spiral staircase to my room."

Hermann awaited the appointed time, like a tiger ready to pounce. By ten o'clock he had already taken up position in front of the Countess' house. The weather was atrocious, the wind howled and snow fell in moist flakes. The lamps burned dimly, the streets were deserted. Every now and then a cabby drove his lean hack by, in the hope of picking up a belated wayfarer. Hermann had nothing on over

his frock-coat, but was conscious neither of wind nor snow. At last the Countess' carriage was brought round. Hermann saw the footmen come out, supporting on either side the bowed form of the old woman in her sable cloak, and her youthful companion slip by after her, in her thin wrap, with flowers in her hair. The carriage door slammed. The carriage rolled heavily over the loose snow. The doorman closed the front door. The windows went dark. Hermann began walking up and down in front of the deserted mansion. When he got to a street lamp he glanced at his watch—it was twenty minutes past eleven. He stood in the light of the lamp, his eyes fixed on the hands of his watch, waiting for the remaining minutes to pass. Precisely at half past eleven he stepped on to the Countess' porch and into the brightly lit entrance. The doorman was not there. Hermann ran up the stairs, opened the door into the hall, and saw a serving-man asleep beneath a lamp, in an ancient, greasy arm-chair. Hermann passed him with a light, firm tread. The ball-room and drawing-room were dark. The lamp in the hall shed a dim light on them. Hermann entered the bedroom. A gilded lamp swung in front of an iconostasis filled with ancient icons. Arm-chairs upholstered in faded damask, and downstuffed sofas, with the gilt wearing off in patches, stood in mournful symmetry along the walls, which were hung with Chinese wallpaper. There were two portraits painted in Paris by Madame Lebrun on the walls. One was the likeness of a man of some forty years, rosy-cheeked and stout, in a bright-green uniform with a star on his breast; the other showed a young belle with an aquiline nose, her powdered locks, brushed up from the temples, adorned with a rose. In every corner could be seen porcelain shepherdesses, clocks made by the skilled hand of Leroy, ornamental boxes, tops, fans, and various toys invented for the amusement of ladies in the end of the previous century, along with Montgolfier's balloon and Mesmer's magnetism. Hermann went behind the screen. There stood a small iron bedstead; on the right was the door of the study, on the left the door into the passage. Hermann opened it, and saw the narrow spiral staircase leading to the poor young lady's room. But he turned back and entered the dark study.

The hours passed slowly. All was quiet. The clock in the

drawing-room struck midnight. Clocks in all the other rooms chimed in one after the other. And all was quiet again. Hermann stood leaning against the cold stove. He was quite calm; his heart beat regularly, like that of one who has resolved upon what was dangerous, but inevitable. The clocks struck one, and then two—and he heard the distant sound of carriage wheels. He was thrown into a state of agitation. The carriage drove up and came to a stop. He could hear the clatter of the steps being let down. There were sounds of bustle in the house. People came running, voices were heard, and the house lit up. Three elderly lady's maids hastened into the bedroom, and the Countess, more dead than alive, entered and sank into the high-backed arm-chair. Hermann peeped through a crack in the door. Lisaveta Ivanovna passed close to him. He could hear her hurried footsteps ascending her staircase. He felt something like a pang of remorse, but it died down at once. He stood as if turned to stone.

The Countess began undressing in front of the mirror. Her maids unpinned her rose-trimmed cap, removed the powdered wig from her grey, closely cropped head. Pins fell from her in showers. The yellow dress embroidered in silver dropped to her swollen feet. Hermann was a witness of the horrid secrets of her toilet. At last the Countess was clad in nothing but a night-gown and night-cap—in this attire, more appropriate to her age, she was not so sinister and hideous.

Like all old people, the Countess suffered from insomnia. When her maids had undressed her she sat down near the window in the high-backed arm-chair and dismissed them. The candles were carried out, and once more the only light in the room came from the icon lamp. Her face a bilious yellow, her drooping lips twitching, the Countess swayed from left to right in her chair. Utter absence of thought could be seen in her dim eyes. Looking at her, one might have supposed that the terrible old woman swayed from side to side, not of her own accord, but under the influence of some concealed galvanic force.

Suddenly an indescribable change came over her death-like countenance. Her lips ceased their twitching, and a light came into her eyes. A strange man stood before the Countess.

"Do not be afraid, for God's sake, do not be afraid!" he was saying in low, clear tones. "I have no intention of harming you—I have come to beg a single favour of you."

The old woman gazed at him in silence, but seemed not to have heard him. Hermann, supposing her to be deaf, bent right over her ear and repeated his words. The old woman was as silent as ever.

"You can make me happy for life," continued Hermann, "and it will cost you nothing. I know that you are able to guess three cards to be played in succession..."

Hermann broke off. Evidently the Countess understood what was wanted of her, and was searching for words to answer him with.

"It was only a jest," she said at last. "I swear to you! It was a jest!"

"This is no jesting matter," replied Hermann sternly. "Remember Chaplitsky whom you helped to win back his losses."

The Countess was visibly embarrassed. Some powerful emotion showed itself on her face, but very soon she sank back into her former apathy.

"Can you name me these three infallible cards?" continued Hermann.

The Countess remained silent. Hermann continued:

"For whom are you treasuring your secret? For your grandchildren? They are rich, as it is; they do not understand the value of money. Your three cards will not help a spendthrift. He who allows a father's legacy to slip through his fingers will die in poverty, despite any diabolical efforts. I am no spendthrift. I know the value of money. Your three cards will not be wasted on me. Come, now! .."

He ceased speaking, and waited anxiously for her reply. The Countess remained silent. Hermann fell on his knees.

"If your heart ever knew the feeling of love," he said, "if you remember its ecstasies, if you have only once smiled to hear the crying of a new-born son, if anything human ever beat in your bosom, I appeal to you as wife, mistress, mother, by all that is sacred in life, do not refuse my request! Reveal your secret to me! Perchance it may be linked with

some terrible sin, with the forfeiture of eternal bliss, a pact with the devil. Bethink yourself that you are old, you have not long to live, I am ready to take your sins on myself. Only reveal to me your secret. Bethink yourself that the happiness of a human being is in your hands. That not only I, but my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will bless your memory, and hold it sacred..."

The old woman did not say a word.

Hermann rose.

"Old witch! " he said, clenching his teeth. "Then I will make you answer me! "

With these words he drew a pistol from his pocket.

At the sight of the pistol the Countess again showed signs of powerful emotion. She jerked back her head and raised her hand, as if to ward off a shot... Then she fell against the back of her chair... and remained motionless.

"Come, you are not a child! " said Hermann, taking her hand. "I ask you for the last time—do you intend to tell me what these three cards are? Yes or no?"

The Countess made no answer. Hermann saw that she was dead.

IV

7 Mai...

Homme sans mœurs et sans religion!
Correspondence

Lisaveta Ivanovna was seated in her room, still in her ball dress, absorbed in profound meditation. As soon as she got home she hastily dismissed her drowsy maid, who offered her services reluctantly, and said she would undress herself. Then she went up to her own room with a fluttering heart, hoping to find Hermann there, and desiring not to find him. She saw at a glance that he was not there, and thanked her stars for the obstacle in the way of their rendez-vous. She sat down without taking off her clothes and began to go over in her mind all the circumstances which had carried her so far in such a short space of time. Three weeks had not yet elapsed since the day she had first seen the young man beneath her window—and she was already corresponding

with him, while he had wrung from her the promise of a nocturnal rendez-vous. If she knew his name, it was only because some of his letters had been signed. She had never spoken to him, never heard his voice, never heard anything about him—till this very evening. And strange to say, at the ball, Tomsy, vexed with the youthful Princess Pauline—for flirting with someone else for a change—wished to revenge himself and show his indifference. He invited Lisaveta Ivanovna to dance with him, and went through the endless mazes of the mazurka with her. He had jested the whole time about her partiality for engineers, assuring her that he knew a great deal more than she could possibly imagine, and some of his jests so nearly hit the mark that Lisaveta Ivanovna could not help thinking, more than once, that he knew her secret.

“Who told you all this?” she asked him, laughing.

“A friend of a certain person whom you know,” replied Tomsy. “A most remarkable man.”

“And who is this remarkable person?”

“His name is Hermann.”

Lisaveta Ivanovna made no reply, but her hands and feet turned cold as ice.

“This Hermann,” continued Tomsy, “is a most romantic individual. He has the profile of a Napoleon, and the soul of a Mephistopheles. I believe he has at least three crimes on his conscience. How pale you are! ..”

“My head aches... What did that, what’s his name—Hermann—tell you?”

“Hermann is greatly displeased with his friend. He says he would have acted quite differently... I’m inclined to think that Hermann has an eye on you himself, for he listens with great interest to the enamoured exclamations of his friend.”

“But where can he have seen me?”

“At church, perhaps, or out driving... God knows—perhaps in your room, while you were asleep. Anything may be expected of him.”

Three ladies came up to them with the question: “*oubli ou regret?*” and the conversation, of such agonising interest for Lisaveta Ivanovna, had to be interrupted.

The lady whom Tomsy chose was the Princess herself.

During one round of the ball-room and a turn in front of her chair they had come to an understanding, and by the time Tomsy got back to his place he was no longer interested either in Hermann or in Lisaveta Ivanovna. She was longing to revive the interrupted conversation; but the mazurka came to an end, and soon after the old Countess took her departure.

Tomsy's words had been nothing but ball-room small talk, but they had sunk deep into the soul of the romantic girl. The portrait sketched by Tomsy coincided with the image she had herself formed, and this type which the latest novels have made a commonplace at once alarmed and captivated her imagination. She sat with her bare arms folded, her head, with the flowers still in her hair, drooping over her half-exposed breast... Suddenly the door opened and Hermann entered. She felt a profound thrill...

"Where have you been?" she asked in a frightened whisper.

"In the old Countess' bedroom," replied Hermann. "I've just come from her. The Countess is dead."

"Dear God! What d'you mean?"

"And it seems," continued Hermann, "that it was I who caused her death."

Lisaveta Ivanovna glanced at him, and Tomsy's words echoed in her heart: *that man has at least three crimes on his conscience*. Hermann seated himself on the window-sill next to her and told her all.

Lisaveta Ivanovna heard him with horror. And so it was not love that had inspired all those passionate letters, those ardent requests, that audacious, stubborn pursuit! Money—that was what his soul thirsted after. It was not she who could quench his desires and make him happy. The poor companion had been nothing but the blind accomplice of a criminal, the murderer of her old benefactress. She wept bitterly, in her belated, anguished repentance. Hermann looked at her in silence—he, too, felt a pang, but it was not the poor girl's tears, nor the exquisite beauty of her grief which stirred his hard heart. He felt no remorse at the thought of the old woman who was dead. Only one thing appalled him—the irretrievable loss of the secret which he had hoped would enrich him.

"You are a monster," said Lisaveta Ivanovna at last.

"I did not desire her death," replied Hermann. "My pistol was not loaded."

They were both silent.

Day began to break. Lisaveta Ivanovna extinguished the dying candle—a pale light crept into the room. She dried her eyes, which were red with weeping, and raised them to Hermann's face: he was sitting on the window-sill with his arms crossed, frowning ominously. In this pose he strikingly resembled a portrait of Napoleon. Even Lisaveta Ivanovna was impressed by the likeness.

"How are you to get out of the house?" she said, after a pause. "I had intended to take you by a concealed stairway, but we should have to go past her bedroom, and I am afraid."

"Tell me how I can find this concealed stairway. I will go."

Lisaveta Ivanovna rose, went to her chest of drawers and took out a key which she handed to Hermann, giving him full instruction. Hermann pressed her cold, passive hand, kissed the top of her bent head, and went away.

He descended the spiral staircase and once more entered the bedroom of the old Countess. The dead old woman sat there as if turned to stone; there was an expression of profound calm on her features. Hermann stood before her, gazed long at her, as if desirous of confirming to himself the appalling truth. At last he went into the study, felt for the papered door in the wall, and began descending the dark staircase, a prey to the strangest sensations. By this very staircase, he told himself, sixty years ago into this very bedroom, at this very hour, in a long embroidered coat, his hair brushed *à l'oiseau royal*, his three-cornered hat pressed to his heart, may have stolen a young fortunate, now long mouldering in the grave, while the heart of his aged mistress had this day ceased to beat...

At the foot of the staircase Hermann found a door, which he unlocked with the same key, and emerged in a passage leading right through the house to the street.

V

The late Baroness von V. appeared to me that night. She was attired in white and said to me: "Greetings, Mr. Privy Councillor."

Swedenborg

Three days after the fatal night Hermann went to the monastery, where a service was to be held over the remains of the deceased Countess. While he felt no remorse he could not, however, quite silence the voice of conscience, which told him: it is you who murdered the old woman. He had little true faith, but many superstitious beliefs. He believed that the dead Countess might have an injurious influence on his life—and resolved to attend her funeral in order to beg her forgiveness.

The church was full. Hermann could hardly push his way through the crowd of mourners. The coffin stood on a rich bier beneath a velvet pall. The dead woman lay with hands folded on her breast, clad in a lace cap and white satin dress. Around the coffin stood her household—the servants in black liveries, with crested ribbons on their shoulders, holding candles, the relatives—her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren—in deep mourning. No one wept; tears would have been *une affectation*. The Countess had been so old that her death caused no surprise to anyone, and her relatives had long regarded her as one who had outlived her time. A youthful priest preached the funeral sermon. He described in simple and touching phrases the peaceful end of the pious lady, for whom the long years had been a calm affecting preparation for a Christian death. "The angel of death," said the preacher, "found her watchful, in the midst of holy meditations, awaiting the midnight bridegroom." The service was accomplished with mournful propriety. The relatives went first to bid farewell to the body. After them, the innumerable guests, who had come to pay obeisance to her who had so long been a participator in their vain festivities, moved towards the coffin. Then came the members of the household. And finally there approached an ancient serving-maid, who was

the same age as her mistress. Two youthful serving-maids held her up by her arms. She had no strength to bow down to the ground, and, alone of them all, shed a few tears as she kissed the cold hand of her late mistress. After her, Hermann ventured to approach the coffin. He bowed to the ground, prostrating himself for a few moments on the cold pavingstones, strewn with branches of fir. Then he rose, as white as the corpse itself, ascended the steps of the bier, and bent down... It seemed to him that the dead woman looked at him quizzically, and winked. Retreating hastily, he missed the step, and fell flat on the ground. He was picked up. At that very moment Lisaveta Ivanovna was carried out to the porch of the church in a swoon. This incident disturbed for a few moments the solemnity of the gloomy ritual. A hollow murmur arose from the crowd and a lean courtier, a near relation to the deceased, whispered in the ear of an Englishman standing beside him that the young officer was her natural son, to which the Englishman replied with a dry: "Oh?"

Hermann was in a state of excessive agitation all day. He dined in a lonely tavern and, contrary to his custom, drank a great deal, in the hope of drowning his anxiety. But the wine only inflamed his imagination still more. As soon as he got home he threw himself down on his bed in his clothes, and fell sound asleep.

When he woke up it was night; the moon lit up his room. He glanced at his watch—it was a quarter to three. He no longer wanted to sleep, and sat up in bed, thinking about the old Countess' funeral.

Just then someone in the street looked at him through the window, and immediately stepped back. Hermann paid no attention to this. A minute later he heard the front door being opened. He thought it was his orderly, drunk as usual, returning from his nocturnal revelries. But he heard unfamiliar footsteps: someone approached with softly shuffling slippers. The door of his room opened and a woman in a white dress entered. Hermann took her for his old nurse and wondered what could have brought her there at such a time. But the white woman glided forward, and was suddenly quite close to him—and Hermann recognised the Countess.

"I have come to you against my will," she said in firm tones. "I have been bidden to fulfil your request. A Three, a Seven and an Ace in succession are your winning cards, but only on condition that you do not stake more than one card a day, and after that never again play your whole life long. I forgive you my death, on condition that you marry my protégée Lisaveta Ivanovna..."

With these words she turned softly towards the door, and shuffled out. Hermann heard the door in the porch bang, and saw someone peer through the window into his room again.

It was a long time before he could recover his senses. He went into the next room. The orderly was asleep on the floor. Hermann roused him with great difficulty. He was drunk as usual, and Hermann could get nothing out of him. The door to the porch was bolted. Hermann went back to his room, lit a candle and wrote an account of the vision he had seen.

VI

"Attendez! "

"How dare you tell me attendez?"

"I said 'attendez-vous', Your Excellency."

Two fixed ideas cannot exist simultaneously in our moral nature, any more than two bodies can occupy one and the same place in the physical world. The Three, the Seven, the Ace soon blurred the image of the dead old woman in Hermann's imagination. The Three, the Seven, the Ace were continually in his mind, and hovered on his lips. When he caught sight of a young girl he said: "How graceful she is—a regular Three of Hearts!" When asked what the time was, he answered five minutes to the Seven. Every paunchy man he came across reminded him of the Ace. The Three, the Seven, the Ace haunted his dreams, assuming all sorts of forms. The Three blossomed out before his eyes in the image of an enormous flower, the Seven was represented by Gothic portals, the Ace by a huge spider. All his thoughts were merged in a single one—to profit by the secret which had cost him so dear. He began thinking of

retiring and travelling. He longed to wrench the treasure from enchanted Fortune in the public gambling salons of Paris. Chance relieved him of these cares.

At that time there was a society of wealthy gamblers in Moscow presided over by the renowned Chekalinsky, whose whole life had been spent playing cards, and who had accumulated millions, winning promissory notes, and losing ready cash. His experience and wisdom had earned him the confidence of his comrades, and his hospitality, famous chef, kindness and cheerfulness had gained him the esteem of the public. He came to Petersburg. The young men flocked to him, neglecting balls for card-playing and preferring the seductions of faro to the sweets of courting. Narumov brought Hermann to his house.

They passed through a suite of resplendent rooms lined with respectful men-servants. A few generals and privy councillors were playing whist. Young men sprawled on the damask sofas, eating ices and smoking pipes. The host was keeping the bank at a long table in the drawing-room, around which crowded some twenty gamblers. He was a man of about sixty of the most genteel appearance. His hair was a silvery grey; his plump, fresh-coloured countenance expressed good humour; his eyes shone, lit up by a continual smile. Narumov introduced Hermann to him. Chekalinsky pressed his hand cordially, asked him not to stand upon ceremony, and went on playing.

The game was a long one. There were over thirty cards on the table. Chekalinsky paused after every deal in order to give the players time to look over their hands, jotted down losses, lent a courteous ear to all demands, and still more courteously smoothed back the corner of a card bent over by a careless hand. At last the game came to an end. Chekalinsky shuffled the cards and prepared to begin another.

"I would like to stake a card, if you please," said Hermann, stretching out his hand from behind a fat gentleman at the card-table. Chekalinsky smiled and bowed silently, in token of submissive consent. Narumov laughingly congratulated Hermann on the breaking of his long fast, and wished him good luck.

"I am ready!" said Hermann, chalking in the sum above his card.

"What's that?" asked the holder of the bank, screwing up his eyes. "I am not sure that I read your sum right."

"Forty-seven thousand," replied Hermann.

At the sound of these words all heads were turned immediately, and all eyes were fixed on Hermann.

"He's gone mad," thought Narumov.

"Allow me to remark," said Chekalinsky, with his habitual smile, "that your stake is high. No one has ever staked more than two hundred and seventy-five *simple* here."

"Well?" replied Hermann. "Will you play?"

Chekalinsky bowed with his usual air of submission.

"I only wished to inform you," he said, "that, since I am honoured with the confidence of my friends, I am obliged to play for cash only. For my part, I am, of course, willing to rely on your word, but for form's sake and to avoid misunderstanding I would ask you to place your money on the table."

Hermann took a bank-note from his pocket and handed it to Chekalinsky, who, glancing rapidly at it, placed it on Hermann's card.

He began dealing. On the right lay a nine, on the left a three.

"Mine!" said Hermann, showing his card.

A murmur rose from the players. Chekalinsky frowned, but the smile returned immediately to his face.

"Shall I give it you now?" he asked Hermann.

"If it's no trouble."

Chekalinsky drew a bundle of bank-notes from his pocket, and counted out the required sum. Hermann took his winning and retired from the table. Narumov was almost beside himself. Herman drank a glass of lemonade and went home.

On the evening of the next day he repaired to Chekalinsky's again. The host was dealing. Hermann went up to the table; the other players immediately made room for him. Chekalinsky bowed to him urbanely.

Hermann waited for a fresh deal, and laid down a card, on which he placed his forty-seven thousand, and his winnings of the previous night.

Chekalinsky began dealing. A knave was on the right, a seven on the left.

Hermann turned up a seven.

Everyone gasped. Chekalinsky was visibly disconcerted. He counted out ninety-four thousand in notes and handed them to Hermann. Hermann received them with the utmost sang-froid and immediately withdrew.

On the following evening Hermann was again at the table. Everyone was expecting him. The generals and privy councillors abandoned their rubber of whist to watch the unusual play. The young officers sprang up from the sofas. All the men-servants were gathered in the drawing-room. Everyone pressed round Hermann. The other players did not put down their stakes, but waited eagerly to see how the game would go. Hermann stood at the table, ready to play against the pale, but ever-smiling Chekalinsky. Each unsealed a new pack of cards. Chekalinsky shuffled. Hermann cut and laid down his card, covering it with a heap of bank-notes. It was like a duel. Profound silence reigned in the room.

Chekalinsky began to deal with an unsteady hand. On the right he turned up a queen, on the left, an ace.

"The ace wins," said Hermann, and showed his card.

"Your queen is covered," said Chekalinsky urbanely.

Hermann started: it was true—instead of an ace there lay the Queen of Spades. He could hardly believe his eyes, and wondered how he could have made such a blunder.

And all of a sudden it seemed to him that the Queen of Spades was narrowing her eyes and laughing at him. He was struck by an extraordinary likeness.

"The old woman! " he cried in horror.

Chekalinsky drew his winnings towards him. Hermann stood motionless. When he went away from the table everyone started talking loudly. "What a game! " exclaimed the players. Chekalinsky again shuffled the cards: the game went on as usual.

CONCLUSION

Hermann has gone mad. He is in ward Number 17 of the Obukhov Hospital, and never answers when he is spoken to, only muttering over and over again with extraordinary rapidity: "Three, seven, ace... three, seven, queen! .."

Lisaveta Ivanovna married a very well-bred young man; he works in a government office and is the possessor of a considerable fortune. He is the son of the old Countess' former steward. Lisaveta Ivanovna is bringing up an impoverished female relative.

Tomsky has been promoted to a captaincy and is going to marry the Princess Pauline.

1833

Translated by Ivy and Tatiana Litvinov

VLADIMIR ODOYEVSKY

(1803—1869)

Vladimir Odoyevsky, writer, scholar, philosopher, musician, music critic, and teacher was born into a family which belonged to Russia's noblest élite. His hospitable salon in St. Petersburg and later in Moscow was frequented by all the leading poets, writers and musicians: Alexander Pushkin, Vassily Zhukovsky, Pyotr Vyazemsky, Yevgeni Baratynsky, Fyodor Tyutchev, Afanasy Fet, Apollon Grigoriev, Ivan Goncharov, Ivan Turgenev, Dmitry Grigorovich, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ivan Krylov, Mikhail Glinka. With his impeccable artistic taste and his truly encyclopedic knowledge, Odoyevsky's opinion was worth a great deal. Turgenev read to him his novel "On the Eve", Glinka sought his advice when working on his opera "Ivan Susanin". Ivan Panayev, critic and editor of the journal "Contemporary" wrote about Odoyevsky: "In spite of the fact that Odoyevsky was a Russian aristocrat of the first water, he was, perhaps, the biggest democrat of his day."

Odoyevsky's principal prose work was his cycle of short stories entitled "Russian Nights" (1844). This book is unique in that it touches upon all the philosophical, economic, social and everyday-life problems of the epoch. His contemporaries called it one of the wisest books ever written in Russian.

It is to his fantastic stories "Sylphid" (1837), "Salamandra" (1841) and "A Peasant Woman of Orlakh" (1842) that Odoyevsky owes his reputation of a mystic and idealist. The critics of these masterpieces of Russian romantic prose failed to take into consideration the breadth of Odoyevsky's scientific interests and his persistent striving to find the key to the solution of the riddles of human psychology.

The hero of "Sylphid" is a society dandy who finds a retreat in the country away from the vanities and amusements of the fashionable world (like Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin"). The sylphid which appears to him is a mysterious unearthly creature. But there is no room for romantic fancies in real life with its unchangeable pattern of behaviour and its smothering trivia. Critic Apollon Grigoriev wrote: "One aspect of the general malady, noted by Gogol and Odoyevsky, is the power of the many over each and every one in spite of the demonic potential of the individual; but in each individual separately there still lurks that evil and terrible disease of the will, or to be more precise, a dissipation of strength which has lost its centre or fulcrum in man." That is what happens to the hero of the story, and he becomes a "living corpse".

THE SYLPHID * * *

(From the Notes of a Rational Man)

Dedicated to Anastasia Sergeyevna P—va

*"We crown the poet with flowers and
lead him away from the city."*

*Plato****

*"A Kingdom has three pillars: the Poet,
the Sword and the Law."*

A Saying of the Northern Bards

*"Poets shall be employed only on ap-
pointed days for the composition of an-
thems in honour of public decrees."*

*One of the Industrial Companies
in the 18th Century*

! ? !

19th century

LETTER 1

At last I am in my late uncle's village. I write to you, sitting in grandfather's enormous armchair by the window. True, the view before me is not particularly impressive: a kitchen garden, two or three apple-trees, a rectangular pond, a bare field, and that's all. Clearly, uncle wasn't a great farmer. I wonder what he used to do, living here for fifteen years without ever going anywhere? Perhaps, like a neighbour of mine, he really got up at about five in the morning, drank his fill of tea and sat down to play Patience right up to lunch. After lunch, he would lie down for a rest and then carry on with his Patience till night. And so on for 365 days in the year. I don't understand it. I've asked people what grandfather used to do. They answered "Nothing much". I like this answer very much. Such a life has something poetic about it, and I hope to follow his example soon. Truly, he was a clever man!

At least I feel calmer here than in the city and it was very shrewd of the doctors to send me here. They probably did it to get rid of me. But I shall fool them, I think. My spleen, believe it or not, has almost gone. It is a mistake to think

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1985

** The name sylphids was used for spirits of the air in one of his treatises on alchemy by the German physician Paracelsus, whose real name was Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, (1493-1541).

***The first epigram is from Book 10 of "The Republic" by Plato (428-348).

that a life of distraction can cure an illness like mine. It's not true; society life maddens and so do books. But imagine my happiness here! I see hardly anyone and I haven't a single book with me! This happiness cannot be described—it has to be experienced. When there is a book lying on the table, you involuntarily reach out for it, you open it, you read. The beginning lures you, promises mountains of gold. You carry on, and you see only soap bubbles; you undergo the feeling that all learned men have experienced since the beginning of time up to our own days: to seek and not to find! This feeling has tormented me since I began remembering myself, and I put my malaise down to this, while the doctors attribute it to bile.

However, do not think that I have been living like a complete hermit. According to the ancient custom, I have, as a new landlord, paid visits to all my neighbours, of whom, mercifully, there are few. I have chatted to them about hunting, which I cannot bear, about farming, which I do not understand, and about their families, of whom I have never heard in my life. But all these gentlemen are so cordial, so hospitable, so candid, that I have become sincerely fond of them. You cannot imagine how charmed I am by their total and placid ignorance of everything that happens outside their own district. With what joy I listen to their incredible opinions of the one and only number of *Moskovskiyе vedomosti** received for the whole district! In this copy, wrapped in wallpaper as a precaution, they read about everything in turn, beginning with the delivery of horses to the capital and ending with the scientific news. The first, needless to say, is read with interest, and the last for amusement, which I sincerely share with them, although for a different reason. For which, however, I enjoy universal respect. Formerly they feared me and thought that, as a newcomer from the capital, I would read them lectures on chemistry or on crop rotation; but when I told them that in my opinion it was better to know nothing than to know as much as our scientists do, that nothing is more detrimental to man's happiness than knowing too much, and that

* One of the oldest Russian newspapers. Published in Moscow from 1756 to 1917.

ignorance never harmed anyone's digestion, they clearly saw that I was a good fellow and splendid person, and they began telling me their various jokes about the clever ones who, against all reason, grow potatoes and other fancy novelties in the villages. It serves those clever fellows right! What do they worry about? The more alert of my new friends argue about politics. They are still upset about the Sultan of Turkey* and are very concerned about the quarrel between Tigil-Buzi and Hafis-Buzi. Also, they can't fathom why people have started referring to Charles X as Don Carlos.** Happy people! We save ourselves from the disgust that politics imposes on the soul by artificial means, that is, we refuse to read the papers; and they do so in the most natural manner, that is, they read but do not understand...

Indeed, as I look at them, I become more and more convinced that true happiness can only consist of knowing everything or knowing nothing, and since man cannot choose the first of these, he must take the second. I am preaching this idea in various forms to my neighbours. It is very much after their own hearts, and I am greatly amused by the eagerness with which they have been listening to me. There is one thing about me they cannot understand: how I, as a splendid person, do not drink punch and don't keep horses and hounds. I hope that they'll become accustomed to this and that I shall be able, even in our district, to destroy this useless education that merely tries a man's patience and is opposed to his inner and natural inclination, which is to sit and do nothing.... But to the devil with philosophy! It can interfere in the thoughts of even the most animal of men... Incidentally, talking about animals... some of my neighbours have very pretty daughters, who however, are comparable not so much to flowers as to vegetables, being juicy, full and robust. You can't get a word

* During a period of almost a century (from 1735 to 1829), five wars broke out between Russia and Turkey: 1735-1739, 1768-1774, 1787-1791, 1806-1812 and 1828-1829.

** Charles X, King of France, who ruled from 1824 to 1830 in succession to Louis XIII, carried out an extremely reactionary policy and, after the July Revolution of 1830, was forced to abdicate. In the same way, Spanish Infante, Don Carlos, one of the reactionary adherents of absolutism and the clergy in the first decade of the 19th century, was compelled by Napoleon to renounce his rights to the throne.

out of them. One of my nearest neighbours, a very rich man, has a daughter named, I think, Katenka, who could be considered an exception to the general rule if she did not also have the habit of pressing her tongue against her teeth and blushing at every word you say to her. I worked hard with her for about half an hour and I still can't make up my mind if there is a brain under that fair envelope—and the envelope itself is indeed beautiful. There is something so nice and childlike in her sleepy eyes and little upturned nose that you involuntarily want to kiss her. I deem it *desirable*, as they say here, to make the little doll talk, and I am prepared at our next meeting to start the conversation with the words of the incomparable Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka,* “There are a great many flies in summer”, and I will see if something slightly longer doesn't come out of it than from the chat between Ivan Fyodorovich and his betrothed.

Farewell. Write to me more often, but do not expect letters from me often. It's a joy receiving your letters, but it's not quite such a joy answering.

LETTER 2

(Two months after the first)

Now speak about the fortitude of the human spirit! Only a short while ago, I was rejoicing that I hadn't a single book with me, but not a month had passed before I felt a craving for books. It began with my neighbours boring me to death. You were right when you wrote to me that I was wrong to regale them with my ironic remarks on the learned, and that my words, by elevating their stupid vanity, would make them sillier than ever. Yes! I am now convinced, my friend, that ignorance is no salvation. I soon found here all the passions that frightened me among the so-called educated people, namely the same ambition, the same vanity, the same envy, the same avarice, the same bitterness, the same flattery, the same baseness, with the only difference that all these passions are more violent here, more open, more vile—and yet the subjects of them are

* A reference to “Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt” (1852), a novella by Nikolai Gogol.

pettier. I will say more: an educated man is entertained by his own education; not every moment of his existence, at least, is his soul in a state of total degradation; music, pictures, the creation of luxury—all these give him little time for baseness... But I find that getting to know my friends more closely is a horrible business; egoism imbues, so to speak, their whole being. To cheat in a purchase, to win an unjust cause or to take a bribe are regarded not secretly, but openly, as the work of a clever fellow. Affection to a person of whom advantage can be taken is the duty of the well brought-up man; long years of bitterness and revenge are a natural thing; drunkenness, cardgames and debauchery of a kind that would never occur to the educated are harmless, permissible diversions. And yet these people are unhappy; they complain and curse their life. How could it be otherwise! All this immorality and all this total obliviousness to human worth pass from the grandfather to the father and from the father to the son in the form of parental precepts and examples; they infect whole generations. I realised, observing these gentlemen at short range, why the immorality is so closely combined with ignorance, and the ignorance with unhappiness. Not for nothing does Christianity call on man to forget this life here; the more man turns his attention to his material needs, the higher the value that he places on domestic affairs, domestic disappointments, what people say, their behaviour towards him, small pleasures—in a word, all the trivialities of life—the more unhappy he is. These trivialities become for him an aim in life; for their sake he worries, rages, consumes every minute of the day, destroys the whole shrine of his soul; and since these trivialities are without number, his soul is subjected to countless irritations and his character is ruined. All the higher, abstract, reassuring concepts are forgotten: tolerance, that supreme virtue, disappears, and man, in spite of himself, becomes evil, irascible, malignant and intolerant. The result is mental hell. We see examples of this every day. The man always uneasy, feeling that not enough respect or honour been shown to him; the mistress of the house completely absorbed in looking after her household; the money-lender incessantly counting his profits; the official forgetting the true mean-

ing of his service in pettifogging office routine; the man swayed by base considerations and forgetting his own dignity—look at these people in their domestic circle and in their dealings with their subordinates—they are frightful! Each lives a life of incessant worry that never achieves its goal, for they are all in such a stew over the ways and means of living that they do not have time to live! As a result of these sad observations of my country friends, I locked myself up and gave orders that no one was to be admitted. Left alone, I wandered about my room, looked a few times at my rectangular pond and even made an unsuccessful attempt to draw it. But you know that I have never had any success with a pencil; I laboured and laboured away, but the result was a mess. I tried to write some verse—the result, as usual, was a tedious argument between thoughts, feet and rhymes. I even made an attempt to sing, although I never could even manage *di tutti palpiti* and, finally, alas! I called my uncle's old bailiff and asked him: "Did my uncle really not have some kind of library?" The little white-haired old man bowed low to me and replied: "No, Master; we never had any such thing." "But what," I asked, "is inside those sealed cupboards that I saw in the mezzanine?" "There are books in them, Master. When your uncle died, your aunt had the cupboards sealed and said nobody was to touch them at all."

"Open them."

We went up to the mezzanine. The steward pulled off the loose wax seals, the cupboard was opened, and what did I see?! Something I had never suspected before—my uncle had been a great mystic. The cupboards were full of the works of Paracelsus, Count Gabalis, Arnaldus Villanovanus, Raimond Lully and other alchemists and cabbalists*. I even noticed the remains of chemical apparatus in the cup-

* "Count Gabalis, or Conversations on the Secret Sciences" was the title of a book about spirits and their relations with human beings, written and published anonymously in Paris in 1670 by the French Abbé Nikola Villard de Montfaucon (1635-1673); Arnaldus of Villanovanus (1235-1312) was a Spanish alchemist and philosopher, and Lully Raimond (1235-1315) was a Spanish mystic and theologian who also carried out alchemical experiments.

board. The old man had truly been seeking the philosopher's stone... The rascal! And how well he had kept his secret!

What else could I do? I began reading the newfound books, and now imagine me, a man in the 19th century, sitting over enormous folios and avidly reading the contents: about *prima materia*, about elemental electricity, about the soul of the sun, about the northern moisture, about the stellar spirits and so on. Amusing, tedious and interesting. While thus engaged, I almost forgot about my pretty neighbour, although her father (the only decent fellow in the whole district, but another bore) often visits me and keeps on the right side of me. Everything I hear about her shows that, as they used to say in the old days, she is a most desirable match, that is, she has a big dowry. Meanwhile I have heard, indirectly, that she does much good. For example, she marries off poor poverty-stricken girls, gives them money for the wedding and often appeases the wrath of her father, a very excitable, irascible man. All the locals call her an angel, which is unusual for these parts. Incidentally, such girls always have a great inclination to marry others off. Why is this so...

LETTER 3

(Two months later)

If you're thinking that I've not only fallen in love but have got married, you're mistaken. I'm busy with something quite different. I drink—and do you know what? Idleness is so inventive! I drink water... Don't laugh, you must first know what kind of water. Rummaging around in my uncle's library, I found a manuscript book containing various formulae for conjuring up the elemental spirits. Many of them were ludicrous in the extreme: you needed the liver of a white raven, or salts of glass, or diamond wood, and for the most part all the ingredients were such that you would never find them all in the same pharmacy. Among the formulae I found the following: "Elementary spirits," says the author, "are very fond of people, and it only requires the slightest effort on man's part to enter into relations with them. Thus, in order to see the spirits borne through the air, it is enough to collect the sun's rays in a glass vessel contain-

ing water and to drink it every day. By this mysterious means, the spirit of the sun will gradually enter into the man and his eyes will be opened to a new world. Whoever decides to wed them by means of one of the noble metals will at once know the very language of the elemental spirits and their mode of life; his being will unite with that of the spirit chosen by him. This will give him knowledge of the mysteries of nature... but more we dare not say... *Sapienti sat...* Enough has been said here for the illumination of your mind, dear reader"—etc. This method seemed so simple to me that I made up my mind to attempt it, even if only to justify the boast that I have tried out the cabbalistic mystery on myself. I remembered the Undine who consoled me so much in boyhood;* but, not wishing to have anything to do with her uncle**, I decided to see a Sylphid. With this aim in mind—idleness is so inventive! —I dropped a turquoise ring into a crystal vase of water and have left it standing in the sun. In the evening, on retiring, I drink some, and so far I find that at least it's very good for my health. I haven't seen any elemental force yet, but I'm sleeping better.

I keep on reading my cabbalists and alchemists, and must say I find these books fascinating. How nice, how candid are the authors! "Our cause," they say, "is very simple. A woman may accomplish it without leaving her distaff—all that is necessary is to understand us." "I saw," say another, "Paracelsus transmute eleven pounds of lead into gold in my presence." "I myself," says another, "can extract the *prima materia* from nature, and by means of it I can easily *change any metal* into another at will." "Last year," says a third, "I made very fine sapphires out of clay," and so on. Each one, after this frank confession, follows it up with a short but impassioned prayer. I find this spectacle unusually touching. A man talks with contempt about what is called the learning of the profane one, that is,

* Undine was a watersprite and the heroine of the novel of that name by the German romantic Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (1777-1843) which was recast in verse by the Russian poet Vassily Zhukovsky (1783-1852).

**A reference to Stream, a watersprite and one of the characters in "Undine".

ourselves. With proud self-confidence he achieves, or thinks to achieve, the ultimate extremes of human power, and at this high point he humbles himself, uttering a grateful, sincere prayer to the Almighty. It is impossible not to trust the knowledge of such a man. Only the ignoramus may be an atheist, as only the atheist may be an ignoramus. We, the proud industrialists of the 19th century, are wrong to despise these books and refuse to know about them. Amid the various follies that demonstrate the infancy of physics, I have found many profound thoughts. Any of them could have seemed false in the 18th century, but today many of them have found confirmation in new discoveries. It is the same with them as with the dragon, which thirty years ago was thought to be a fabulous creature and which has now actually been found among the antediluvian animals. So tell me, must we now doubt the possibility of transmuting lead into gold when we have found a way of creating water, which was thought to be basic element for so long? What chemist will refuse an experiment to destroy a diamond and restore it to its original state? And why should the thought of making gold be more ridiculous than that of making diamonds? In a word, laugh at me as you wish, but I repeat that these forgotten people are worthy of our attention. If we cannot believe everything they tell us, at least we must not doubt that their writings hint at knowledge which has now been lost and which it would be a good thing to rediscover. You will be convinced of this when I send you an excerpt from my uncle's library.

LETTER 4

In my last letter, I forgot to tell what had prompted me to begin it. The fact is, my friend, that I am in a strange predicament and I need your advice. I have written to you several times about Katya, my neighbour's daughter. I finally got her talking, and I found that she not only has natural intelligence and a pure heart, but another most unexpected quality: she is head over heels in love with me. Yesterday, her father called and told me what I had only heard mentioned, because all my affairs are handled by the

steward. We are engaged in a lawsuit over several thousand dessyatines of forest which are the main source of income for my peasants. This case has been going on over thirty years now, and if it doesn't end in my favour, my peasants will be completely ruined. My neighbour told me about it in great detail and ended with a suggestion that we should make our peace. And so that the peace should be a lasting one, he dropped a fairly subtle hint that he would very much like to have me as his son-in-law. It was like a scene out of a vaudeville, but it has got me thinking. Why not, indeed? My youth is over, I shall not be a great man, I am bored with life. Katya is a very nice girl; she is obedient and not too talkative. If I marry her, I shall put an end to a stupid lawsuit and do at least one good thing in life: I shall ensure the welfare of my dependents. In a word, I would very much like to marry Katya, settle down as a landowner, give my wife the management of all my affairs, say nothing for whole days and smoke my pipe. That would be paradise, would it not?.. All this is leading up to the announcement that I have already decided to get married, but have not spoken about it to Katya's father and shall not do so until I have had your answers to the following questions. Do you think I will be any good as a married man? Will I be saved from the spleen by my wife, who, don't forget it, has the habit of not saying a word for whole days and consequently, has no way of making me fed up with her? In a word, should I wait until I've come up with something new, unexpected and unusual, or is my career already over and my only worry is that as much fat as possible should be obtained from my person? I await your answer with impatience.

LETTER 5

Thank you, my friend, for your decisiveness, your counsel and your blessing. Almost as soon as I received your letter, I galloped over to my Katya's father and formally proposed. If you could only have seen how overjoyed she was; she blushed and even said the following words, into which she poured all her pure and innocent soul: "I don't know," said she to me, "whether I shall be able to, but I

shall try to make you as happy as I am going to be myself." Such very simple words, but if only you could hear with what emotion they were uttered. You know that one word often contains more feeling than a long speech. In Katya's words I felt a whole world of thought; they must have cost her dearly; and I was able to appreciate all the strength that love had given her to prevail over her maidenly shyness. The deeds of a preson should be appreciated in comparison with his or her strength, and I had always thought that to prevail over timidity was beyond Katya's powers... After this, as you can imagine, we embraced and kissed, the old man burst into tears, and at the end of the fast we shall have a merry feast and a wedding. You simply must come and stay with me. You must abandon all your affairs; I want you to be the witness, as they say, of my happiness. Come, if only out of curiosity, to look at a bride and groom the like of whom you have probably never seen before. They sit opposite one another, stare at each other, both say nothing and both are very content.

LETTER 6

(A few weeks later)

I don't know how to begin this letter. You will think me mad. You will laugh and curse me... I permit you to do anything; I even permit you not to believe me. But I cannot doubt what I have seen and am seeing every day with my own eyes. No! Not all my uncle's formulae are rubbish. Truly, this is a relic of ancient mysteries that still exist in nature, and there is much that we do not know, there is much that we have forgotten, and we regard many truths as ravings. This is what happened to me, so read and marvel! My conversations with Katya, as you may well imagine, did not make me forget my vase of solar water. As you know, love of knowledge or, to put it simply, curiosity, is my basic element; it interferes in all my affairs, mixes them up and hampers my life. I will never shake it off; there is always something that draws me, something that lingers in the distance; the soul strains and suffers... But to business. Yesterday evening I went up to the vase

and noticed a movement in my ring. At first I thought it was an optical illusion and, to make sure, I picked the vase up in my hands. As soon as I made a slight movement, my ring disintegrated into tiny pale-blue and golden sparks; they floated up in the water as fine threads and soon vanished entirely; but the water turned all gold with pale-blue glints. I returned the vase to its former place and my ring formed on the bottom again. I must admit to you that an involuntary tremor ran all over my body, I called a servant and asked him if he had noticed anything in my vase. He replied that he had not. I then knew that this strange phenomenon was visible to me alone. In order not to give the servant cause to laugh at me, I dismissed him, commenting that the water looked dirty. Left alone I repeated my experiment, pondering over the strange phenomenon. Several times I poured the water from the vase into the other. Each time the phenomenon repeated itself with amusing precision—and yet it could not be explained by any of the laws of physics. Could it be true? Was I destined to be the witness of the strange mystery? It seems to me so important that I am determined to investigate it thoroughly. I have taken to my books more eagerly than ever before, and now that the experiment has been accomplished before my eyes, the relations between man and that inaccessible other world becomes more and more comprehensible. What is going to happen next?...

LETTER 7

No, my friend, you are mistaken and so am I. I am predestined to witness a great mystery of nature and to proclaim it to people to remind them of the marvellous force that is in their power and about which they have forgotten; to remind them that we are surrounded by other worlds hitherto unknown to them. How simple are all the actions of nature! What simple means it uses for the making of things that amaze and horrify man! Listen to me and marvel.

Yesterday, absorbed in watching over my miraculous ring, I noticed a sort of movement in it again. I looked

closer, and pale-blue waves were streaming above the water, and rainbow opal beams were reflected in them. The turquoise turned into an opal, and something like the radiance of the sun rose from it into the water. All the water was agitated; golden springs were bubbling up and scattering pale-blue sparks. It was a combination of all possible colours, now mingling in countless hues, now distinctly separating. Finally, the rainbow shimmer faded and a pale green light took its place. Over the green waves ran pink threads that intertwined for a long time and then converged on the bottom of the vessel into a beautiful, rich rose. Then everything subsided: the water cleared, with only the petals of the gorgeous flower swaying slowly. That was several days ago. Since then, I have been getting up early and going to my mysterious rose in expectation of the next miracle, but in vain. The rose blooms tranquilly and only fills my room with an indescribable fragrance. I involuntarily remembered something I read in a cabbalistic book about the elemental spirits passing through all the realms of nature before they achieve their real form. Astounding! Astounding!

(A few days later)

Today, I went to my rose and noticed something new at its centre... To examine it better, I picked up the vase and again decided to empty it into another one; but hardly had I started moving it, when green and pink threads ran out from the rose again and, mingled with the water, overflowed in a banded stream into another vessel, and my beautiful flower appeared on the bottom of the vase once more. Everything became calm, but I glimpsed something in the flower's centre. The leaves opened gradually and—I could not believe my eyes! — between the orange stamens there reposed—will you believe me?—there reposed an amazing, indescribable, incredible creature—a woman, only just visible to the naked eye! How am I to describe the rapture mingled with horror that I felt. She was no child. Imagine a miniature portrait of a beautiful woman in the full bloom of her years and you will gain a feeble idea of the marvel in front of my eyes. She was lying at ease on her soft bed, and

her light brown hair, gently stirred by the water, now revealed, now concealed her maidenly charms from my eyes. She appeared to be plunged into a deep sleep and, my eyes eagerly fixed on her, I held my breath so as not to disturb that sweet tranquillity.

Oh, now I believe the Cabbalists! I am even amazed that I should have once regarded them with a mocking smile of mistrust. No, if there is a truth on this earth, it exists solely in their works! Only now have I grasped that they are not like our ordinary scientists; they do not quarrel or contradict one another. They all speak about the same mystery; only their terms differ, but these are comprehensible to anyone who has fathomed their mysterious meaning... Farewell! Having decided to explore all the mysteries of nature to the full, I am severing my relations with people. A new and secret world is revealing itself to me, and only for posterity shall I preserve the history of my discoveries. And so, my friend, I am destined to greatness in this life after all...

**LETTER FROM GAVRILA SOFRONOVICH
REZHENSKY TO THE PUBLISHER**

Dear Sir!

Excuse me if, although I do not personally have the honour of being acquainted with you, I have decided to trouble you with this letter, having learned of your close friendship with Mikhail Platonovich. You are, of course, aware that I was involved in a lawsuit with his late uncle, whose lawful heir he is, about a considerable quantity of building timber and firewood. Feeling an inclination towards my elder daughter Katerina Gavrilovna, your friend offered himself to me as a son-in-law, to which, as you know, I announced my consent. As a result of this, hoping it would be to our mutual advantage, I stopped the lawsuit. I now, however, find myself extremely dismayed. Soon after the betrothal, when the announcement had been sent to all our acquaintances, my daughter's dowry had finally been made ready and all the necessary papers had been cleared, Mikhail Platonovich suddenly stopped visiting me. Attributing this to ill health, I sent a servant to him and

finally, in spite of my frailty, set off to visit him myself. It seemed improper and hurtful to remind him that he had forgotten his betrothed. He could at least have apologised! He merely told me about a very important matter he had undertaken, which he had to finish before the wedding and which would demand his vigilant attention and surveillance for some time. I assumed that he wanted to start up the potash works which he had mentioned before on a number of occasions. I thought he intended to give me a surprise and prepare a wedding gift for me, showing in practice that he could undertake business matters, since I had often grumbled about his aimlessness. However, I did not notice any preparations for such works and I do not see them now. I decided to wait and see what would happen, but yesterday, to my great astonishment, I learned that he had locked himself up and refused to see anyone; even his meals were now being served to him through the hatch. At this point, dear sir, a very strange thought occurred to me. His late uncle had lived in the same house and had the reputation in our district of dabbling in black books. I, sir, once studied at a university. Although I am somewhat old-fashioned, I don't believe in black books. But it takes little to do much harm, especially to a philosopher like your friend! What convinces me most of all that something ill has befallen Mikhail Platonovich, is the rumour, which reached me by chance, that he spends whole days sitting and staring at a decanter of water. Under such circumstances, my dear sir, I turn to you with a most humble request: make haste to come here immediately and bring Mikhail Platonovich back to his senses, since you are sympathetic to him. It will also help me to decide whether to begin the lawsuit again or go through with what has been decided. After the insult inflicted on me by your friend, I will not visit him at his home, although Katya begs me to do so with tears in her eyes.

In hope of meeting you soon, I have the honour to be etc.

STORY

On receiving this letter, I considered it my first duty to approach a doctor of my acquaintance, a very experienced

and learned man. I showed him my friend's letter, told him about his condition and asked him if he understood any of it. "It's all clear," he said, "and nothing new to a medical man... Your friend has simply gone out of his mind..." "But read his letters again," I objected. "Is there the slightest sign of madness? Put aside the strange subject, and they will seem like the cold description of a physical phenomenon..."

"That's all clear..." repeated the doctor. "You know that we distinguish between various kinds of madness, or *insania*. The first covers all aspects of possession and does not concern your friend. The second includes, first, a propensity to see ghosts, or *hallucinations*; second, a conviction of communion with spirits, or *demonomania*. It is very understandable that your friend, naturally inclined to hypochondria, in the village, alone, with no distractions, should have immersed himself in reading all kinds of rubbish, which reading has affected the nerves of his brain..."

The doctor spent a long time explaining to me in what way a man may be entirely rational and yet mad, seeing what he cannot see and hearing what he cannot hear. Unfortunately, I cannot pass on all these explanations to the reader because I didn't understand them at all; but, convinced by the doctor's reasoning, I decided to invite him to come with me to my friend's village.

Mikhail Platonovich was lying in bed, looking very thin and pale. He had not taken any food for several days. When we went up to him, he did not recognise us, although his eyes were open and a wild light was blazing in them. He did not utter a word in reply to what was said... Sheets of paper covered with writing lay on the table. I was only able to distinguish a few lines. Here they are:

EXTRACTS

(From Mikhail Platonovich's Diary)

"Who are you?"

"I have no name, I don't need one..."

"Where are you from?"

"I am yours, that is all I know. I belong to you and no

one else... But why are you here? It is so stifling and cold here! The sun wafts for us, the flowers ring, sounds are fragrant... Follow me... Follow me! .. How heavy your clothes are—cast them off, cast them off... It is a long way to our world... But I am not leaving you! How dead everything is in your dwelling... All living things are shut up inside cold shell: break it open, break it open! ”

...Your knowledge is here?.. Your art is here?.. You separate time from time and space from space, desire from hope, thought from its fulfilment, and you do not die of boredom? Follow me, follow me! Quick, quick! ”

“...Is this you, proud Rome, capital of centuries and peoples? How the convulvulus has spread over your ruins... But the ruins stir, white columns rise from the green turf and range themselves in harmonious order. shaking off its eternal ashes, a vault has curved bravely over them, the platform spreads itself with sportive mosaics—living people crowd on the stage, mighty sounds of the ancient language mingle with the talk of the waves—an orator in white robes with a chaplet on his head raises his hands... And all vanishes: the magnificent buildings bow to the ground, the columns buckle, the vaults crash down—the convulvulus winds through the ruins again. All is silent, the bell calls to prayer, the temple is open, a musical instrument plays, thousands of harmonious trills flow from under my fingers, thought strains after thought, they fly away one after another like visions... Could they be caught or stopped? And the submissive instrument again repeats, like a faithful echo, all the momentary, irrecoverable movements of the soul... The temple is empty, the light of the moon bathes countless statues. They step down from their places and walk past me, full of life. Their words are ancient and new, their smiles solemn and their eyes meaningful. But they return to their pedestals and again the moonlight bathes statues of stone. It is late... A cheerful, quiet refuge awaits us. The Tiber glimmers in the windows; beyond lies the Capitol of the ancient city. An enchanting picture. It has flowed into the close confines of our fireplace. Yes! That is another Tiber there, another Capitol! How cheerfully the fire crackles... Embrace me, charming maid... The sparkling liquid foams in the gemstone goblet...

Drink, drink... Out there the snowflakes are falling and covering the road. Here I am warmed by your embraces...

"Race on, race on, swift steeds, over the crisp snow; raise a column of icy dust. The sun shines in each speck, roses have burst into flower on the charming countenance— she brings her fragrant lips close to mine... Where did you learn this art of kissing? Everything in you burns and floods every nerve in my body with a boiling liquid... Race on, race on, swift horses, over the crisp snow... What? Is that not the shouting of battle? Are there not new hostilities between heaven and earth?... No, brother has betrayed brother, the innocent maid is at the mercy of crime... And the sun shines and the air is cool? No! The earth has been shaken, the sun has gone dark, the storm comes down from the heavens, has saved the victim and washed the culprit—and again the sun shines, and the air is quiet and cool, brother kisses brother and force bows down before innocence... Follow me, follow me... There is another world, a new world... Look, the crystal has dissolved and there is a new sun inside it... The great mystery of the crystals is being accomplished; let us lift the curtain... The denizens of the transparent world are celebrating their life with rainbow-coloured flowers. Here, air, sun, and life are all eternal light. They draw fragrant resins from the world of plants, set them in the shimmering rainbows and join them with the fiery element... Follow me, follow me! We are still only on the first step... Streams run over countless vaults; they soar swiftly upwards and fall swiftly to earth. Above them, a living prism refracts the sun's rays; they wind through the veins, and the fountain flings their radiant sparks out into the open air. Now they are sprinkled over the petals of the flowers, now they wind over a patterned grille in a long ribbon; the life spirits, chained to eternally seething cubes, convert the living moisture into fragrant vapour; it spreads over the vaults in clouds and falls as heavy rain into the mysterious vessel of vegetable life... Here, in the very holy of holies, the embryo of life struggles with the embryo of death, the living saps turn to stone, are motionless in metal veins, and the dead elements are transformed by the essence of the spirit... Follow me, follow me! .. On the elevated throne sits the thought of man, with golden chains stretching to it

from the whole world. The spirits of nature bow down in the dust before it; the light of life rises in the east, in the west dreams swarm in the glow of the evening sunset and, at the caprice of thought, now merge into one harmonious form, now scatter like flying clouds... At the foot of the throne, *she* crushed me in her embraces.. We had left the earth behind!

“Look— a speck of you floats over there in the boundless void. There, the curses of man, the sobs of the mother, the talk of mundane need, the jeers of the evil, the sufferings of the poet—here all things merge into sweet harmony, here your speck is not an anguished world but a graceful instrument whose harmonious sounds gently rock the waves of the aether.

“Bid farewell to the poetic *earthly* world! Yes, you have poetry on earth too! Ragged crown of your bliss! Poor people! Strange people! In your murky deeps you have found that even suffering is happiness! You give a poetic glow to suffering! You are proud of your suffering, you want the inhabitants of the other world to envy your life! There is no suffering in our world: that is the lot only of the imperfect world, the creation of the imperfect being! Man is free to bow down before it or to cast it from him, like the worn clothes of the traveller who has beheld his homeland.

“Do you really think that I did not know you? Even as a little child, I accompanied you in the breath of the breeze, in the rays of the spring sun, in the drop of fragrant dew, in the unworldly dreamings of the poet. When the pride of his strength is reborn in man, when the heavy disdain falls from his eyes onto the images of the sublunar world, when his soul, shaking off the dust of mortal torments, tramples with a smile on the nature quivering before him, then we sail over to you, then we await the moment to bear you out of the crude letters of matter— then you are worthy to meet us... See if there is any suffering in my kiss; in it there is no time, it will last for an eternity. Each moment for us is a new delight! .. Oh, do not betray me, do not betray yourself! Beware of the temptations of your crude, despicable nature!

“Look yonder; in the distance, on your earth, the poet bows down before a heap of stones overgrown with an unfeeling organism of vegetable power. ‘Nature!’, he cries in ecstasy, ‘majestic nature, what is more sublime than you in this world? What is the thought of man before you?’ And

blind, lifeless nature laughs at him and, at the moment of the full exultation of human thought, sends down an icy avalanche to annihilate man and the thoughts of man! Only in the soul of the soul are the chasms deep! Dead nature dares not enter their depths for down there is the independent, firm world of man. *Here*, the poet's life is a holy of holies! *Here*, poetry is truth! *Here*, everything is said that the poet has left unsaid. *Here*, earthly sufferings are transformed into infinitely many delights...

"Oh, love me! I shall never fade: eternally young, my maiden's breast shall throb on yours! Eternal pleasure shall be for you new and full, and in my embraces the impossible desire shall be an eternally possible essentiality! .."

"This infant is our child. He does not await the solicitude of a father, he does not awaken false doubts, he has fulfilled your hopes in advance, he is young and mature, he smiles and does not sob—for him there are no possible sufferings, if only you do not remember your coarse, contemptible vale of tears... No, you shall not slay us with desire alone!

"But further, further, there is another, higher world, where thought itself merges with desire. Follow me, follow me! .."

It was impossible to decipher any more; there were only incoherent, disconnected words: "love... plant... electricity... man... spirit... " The last lines had been written in a strange script unknown to me and broke off on every page...

Having put up with all these ravings as far as we could, we took practical measures and began by putting our dreamer in a bouillon bath. The patient began trembling all over. "A good sign!" exclaimed the doctor. There were strange emotions on the sick man's face—repentance, appeal, the agony of parting. The tears rolled down his cheeks... I drew the doctor's attention to his expression... The doctor replied: "Facies Hippocratica! "*"

An hour later, we gave him another bouillon bath and a spoonful of medicine. We had difficulties in administering it—the sick man struggled and resisted for some time, but he swallowed it in the end. "We've won!" exclaimed the doctor.

*The look of death (*Lat.*)

The doctor insisted that we must do everything possible to pull the patient out of his stupor and irritate his *senses*. We did so: first a bath, then a spoonful of tasty medicine, then a spoonfull of bouillon. Thanks to our intelligent care, the sick man began to recover visibly. Finally, his appetite returned and he began eating without our assistance...

I tried not to remind my friend of anything that had happend before, but to draw his attention to practical and useful things—the condition of his estate, the advantage of starting up a potash works on it, and the transfer of the peasants from quit-rent to *corvée*... But my friend listened to me as if in a dream, did not contradict me at all, obeyed me without question, drank, ate when offered food, but remained completely aloof.

What the doctor's medicine had failed to achieve was accomplished by my chats about our dissolute youth and especially by a few bottles of excellent Champagne La Fitte which I had had the foresight to bring with me. This, together with some marvellous *saignant* beaf steaks, put my friend right back on his feet again, so that I even ventured to talk about his fiancée. He listened to me with attention and agreed with everything I said. Being a conscientious person, I did not delay in availing myself of his good mood and galloped over to see his future father-in-law, sorted everything out, dealt with the tricky problems, wrote a dowry list, dressed my eccentric friend in his old uniform, married him off and, wishing him every happiness, departed for home, where business awaited me in the Civic Chamber. I must admit that I left feeling very pleased with myself and my success. In Moscow, all the relatives, naturally, showered me with their affection and gratitude.

Having set my own affairs in order, I nevertheless decided several months later to visit the young couple, especially since I had not received any news from the groom.

It was morning when I found him in. He was sitting in his dressing-gown with a pipe clenched between his teeth. His wife was pouring out tea. The sun was shining through the window and a branch bearing an enormous ripe pear peeped in. He seemed delighted to see me, but was not very talkative...

I waited until his wife left the room and said, shaking my head:

"Now then, what's the matter? Unhappy?"

What do you think? He got talking? He did indeed!

"Happy! " he said with a sneer. "D'you know what you really meant by that word? You praised yourself inwardly and thought: 'What a sensible fellow I am! I've cured that madman, I've married him off and now, thanks to me, he's happy... Happy! ' You thought about all the praises of my aunts and uncles, all those so-called sensible people—and your vanity is flattered. Isn't that it?"

"What if it were..." I said.

"Enjoy the praises and gratitude, but don't expect mine. No! Katya loves me, our estate is in order, the revenues are coming in as they should—in a word, you've given me happiness, but it's not mine: you've mistaken the number. You sensible people are like the cabinet-maker who was ordered to make a case for some expensive physics instruments. He measured them wrongly, the instruments wouldn't fit inside, so what was he to do? The box was ready and beautifully polished. The workman ground the instruments — bent one here, straightened one there—they went into the box and fitted beautifully. It was a pleasure to look at them. Only one thing was wrong. The instruments were ruined. Gentlemen! Make the box for the instruments, not the instruments for the box! "

"What do you mean?"

"You are very pleased that you have cured me, as you say; that is, you have coarsened my feelings, covered them with an impenetrable shell, made them inaccessible to any other world except your box... Fine! The tool has fitted in, but it's been ruined; it was made for another purpose... Now, when in the midst of daily life I feel that my stomach is getting bigger every hour and my head is sinking into an animal stupor, I remember with despair the time when, in your opinion, I was insane, when a charming creature flew down to me from an unseen world, when it revealed secrets to me which I now cannot even express, but which I understood... Where is that happiness? Give it back to me! "

"You, my friend, are a poet, that's all," I said in exasperation. "Write verse..."

"Write verse! " objected the sick man. "Write verse, you say! Your verse is only another box. You've taken poetry to pieces: here's some prose, here's some verse, here's some music, here's some paintings—what d'you want me to do? But perhaps I am the artist of an art that does not yet exist, that is neither poetry, nor music, nor painting — an art which I was to discover and which now, perhaps, will go into obscurity and lie dormant for a thousand centuries! Find it for me! Perhaps it will console me for the loss of my former world! "

He bowed his head, his eyes took on a strange expression and he said to himself: "It's over—won't come back—she died—couldn't bear it—fall, fall! " and so on.

However, this was his last attack. Later, as I heard, my friend became a thoroughly normal person. He started a hunt, a potash work, a fruit farm, brilliantly won several lawsuits over land (he farms by the open-field system). He is in robust health, his cheeks are rosy, and he has acquired a most respectable paunch (N. B. He takes bouillon baths to this day, they help him a great deal). There is only one bad thing: they say that he drinks rather heavily with his neighbours, and sometimes even without them. They also say that there's not a chambermaid who can get past him unmolested—but who's perfect in this world? At least he's a man now like the rest of them.

This was the story as told by an acquaintance of mine, a very sensible person, who delivered Platon Mikhailovich's letters to me. I must admit that I haven't understood this narrative at all. Perhaps the reader will be more fortunate!

MIKHAIL LERMONTOV

(1814–1841)

Mikhail Lermontov, the great Russian poet, lived at a time when prose genres were only just becoming established in Russia, with Karamzin and, above all, Pushkin producing models of brilliant writing. To quote Nikolai Gogol: "No writer of ours has ever written such correct, beautiful and fragrant prose."

Lermontov came from a noble family of ancient lineage. He received an excellent education at home, and then went on to Moscow University. A brilliant military career awaited him. But in 1837 he foredoomed it by writing his poem "On the Death of the Poet" in which he accused the tsar and his court of bringing about the death of Pushkin. Nicholas I never forgave Lermontov his "impudence" till the end of his days. One sentence of exile followed upon another; a duel was fought, and Lermontov was killed. "A cur dies a cur's death," Nicholas I

is reputed to have commented on the death of yet another talent.

Lermontov's best prose work, the novel "*A Hero of Our Time*" (1840), was planned as a collection of short stories and some of them—"Bella", "*The Fatalist*" and "*Taman*"—were published as such by the journal "*Otechestvenniye Zapiski*".

Among the numerous problems of major concern to the author and his hero Pechorin, the question of whether to act or submit is the prevalent one. Answering this question, Pechorin asserts the freedom of the individual to choose, and the need for each man to shape his own life and bear full responsibility for his actions. "I prefer to doubt everything; such a disposition does not preclude a resolute character; on the contrary, as far as I am concerned, I always advance more boldly when I do not know what is awaiting me."*

* Mikhail Lermontov, *Selected Works*, Progress, Moscow, 1976, p. 300.

TAMAN

Taman is the most wretched of all seaboard towns in Russia. I very nearly died of hunger there, and was almost drowned into the bargain. I arrived by post chaise late at night. The coachman stopped his tired troika at the gate of the only brick building, which stood at the entrance to the town. Roused from a doze by the tinkling of the carriage bell, the Black Sea Cossack on sentry duty shouted wildly: "Who goes there?" A Cossack sergeant and a local policeman emerged from the building. I explained that I was an officer on my way to a line unit on official business and demanded lodgings for the night. The policeman took us around town. All the cottages we stopped at were occupied. It was chilly, and not having slept for three nights running, I was exhausted and began to lose my temper. "Take me anywhere you want, you scoundrel! To the devil, if you please, as long as there's a place to stay!" I shouted. "There is still one place left," the policeman replied, scratching the back of his head. "Only you will not like it, sir; there are queer goings on there..." Failing to grasp the precise meaning of the last remark, I told him to go ahead, and after wandering about for a long time in muddy alleys lined with rickety fences, we drove up to a small hut on the seashore.

A full moon lit up the reed roof and white walls of my prospective dwelling. In the courtyard, which was fenced in by a crude stone wall, stood another miserable, crooked hut, smaller and older than the first. A cliff dropped abruptly to the sea from the very walls of the hut, and down below the dark blue waves broke against the shore with an incessant roar. The moon looked down serenely upon the restless but obedient sea, and by its light I could discern two ships at anchor far from the shore, their black rigging a

motionless cobweb against the paler background of the skyline. "There are ships in the anchorage," thought I. "Tomorrow I shall leave for Gelenjik".

A Cossack from a line unit served as my batman. Telling him to take down my portmanteau and dismiss the driver I called for the master of the house. There was no answer. I knocked, and still there was no reply. What could it mean? Finally a boy of about fourteen appeared on the porch.

"Where is the master?" "No master." "What? You mean there is no master at all?" "None at all." "And the mistress?" "Gone to town." "Who's going to open the door for me?" said I, kicking at it. The door opened by itself, and a dank smell came from the hut. I struck a sulphur match and brought it close to the youngster's nose, and in its light I saw two white eyes. He was blind, totally blind from birth. As he stood motionless before me I looked closely into his face.

I admit that I am greatly prejudiced against all the blind, squint-eyed, deaf, dumb, legless, armless, hunchbacked and so on. I have observed that there is always some strange relationship between the external appearance of a man and his soul, as if with the loss of a limb the soul too lost some faculty of feeling.

So I examined the blind lad's face, but what would you have me read on a face without eyes? I looked at him long with involuntary pity when a faint smile flitted across his thin lips, making, I know not why, the most unpleasant impression on me. A suspicion that he was not as blind as he seemed flashed through my mind, and in vain I tried to assure myself that it is impossible to simulate a cataract. And why should anyone do that? But I couldn't help suspecting, for I am often inclined to form preconceived notions.

"And you the master's son?" I asked him at last. "Nay." "Then who are you?" "Orphan, a poor orphan." "Has the mistress any children?" "Nay. There was a daughter but she ran away across the sea with a 'Tartar'". "What kind of a Tartar?" "The devil knows! A Crimean Tartar, a boatman from Kerch."

I walked into the hut. Two benches, a table and a huge trunk next to the stove were the sole furnishings. Not a

single icon was there on the wall—a bad sign that! The sea wind blew in through a broken window. I extracted the stub of a wax candle from my portmanteau and lighting it began to lay out my things. I put my sword and gun in a corner, laid my pistols on the table, and spread out my cloak on a bench while the Cossack laid out his on the other. In ten minutes he was snoring, but I could not sleep; the lad with the white eyes kept swimming before me in the gloom.

About an hour passed in this way. The moon shone into the window and a beam of light played on the earthen floor of the hut. Suddenly a shadow darted across the bright strip on the floor. I got up and looked out of the window. Someone again ran past and disappeared God knows where. It did not seem possible that the creature could have run down the cliff to the shore, yet he could not have gone anywhere else. I got up, put on my *beshmet*, girded on a dagger and softly crept out of the hut. The blind boy was coming towards me. I drew close to the fence, and he went past with sure though cautious tread. He carried a bundle under his arm. Turning toward the boat landing, he began to descent along a narrow, steep path. "The blind receive their sight, and the deaf hear," I thought, following close enough not to lose sight of him.

In the meantime clouds began to envelop the moon and a fog rose at sea. The stern light of the ship nearest the shore was barely visible through it. On the shore gleamed the foam of the breakers, which threatened to submerge in any moment. Picking my way with difficulty down the steep incline, I saw the blind boy stop, then turn to the right and proceed so close to the water that it seemed the waves must surely seize him and carry him out to sea. It was obvious, however, that this was not the first time he was making the journey, judging by the confidence with which he stepped from stone to stone and avoided the holes. At last he stopped as if listening for something, then sat down on the ground with his bundle beside him. Hidden behind a projecting cliff I watched his movements. A few minutes later a figure in white appeared from the other side, walked up to the blind boy and sat down beside him. The wind carried fragments of their conversation to me.

"What do you say, blind one?" a woman's voice said. "The gale is too heavy; Yanko won't come."

"Yanko is not afraid of gales," the other replied.

"The fog is thickening," came the woman's voice again with a note of sadness.

"It will be easier to slip by the patrol ships in the fog," was the reply.

"What if he is drowned?"

"Well, what of it? You'll go to church on Sunday without a new ribbon."

A silence followed. I was struck, however, by one thing: the blind boy had spoken to me in the Ukrainian dialect, and now he was speaking pure Russian.

"You see, I am right," said the blind boy again, clapping his hands. "Yanko does not fear the sea, or the winds, or the fog, or yet the coast guards. Listen, that's not the waves splashing, you can't fool me; those are his long oars".

The woman jumped up and peered anxiously into the distance.

"You're raving, blind one," she said. "I don't see anything."

I must admit that, strain as I did, I failed to discern anything like a boat in the distance. Some ten minutes had passed thus when a black speck now growing larger, now diminishing, appeared among the mountainous billows. Slowly climbing to the crests of the waves and sharply dropping into the troughs, the boat approached the shore. It was an intrepid oarsman who ventured on a night like this to cross the twenty versts of the strait, and the reason that spurred him on must have been pressing indeed. Thus thinking, my heart involuntarily quickening its beat, I watched the frail craft dive with the dexterity of a duck and then leap up from the watery chasm through the flying foam with a swift movement of the oars that recalled the thrust of wings. I thought it must surely crash full force against the shore and be dashed to pieces, but it neatly swung around and slipped safely into a tiny bay. A man of medium stature wearing a Tartar sheepskin cap stepped from the boat. He motioned with his hand and all three commenced to haul something from the craft; the cargo was so great that to this day I cannot understand why the boat

had not sunk. Each shouldering a bundle, they set out along the shore and I soon lost sight of them. I had to return to my lodgings. I must admit, however, that all these strange doing alarmed me, and I could hardly wait for the morning.

My Cossack was very much surprised when upon waking up he found me fully dressed, but I gave him no explanation. After admiring for some time the blue sky mottled with ragged little clouds and the Crimean coast which spread out in a line of mauve in the distance and ended in a crag topped by the white tower of a light-house, I set out for the Fanagoria fort to inquire at the commandant's when I could leave for Gelenjik.

But, alas, the commandant was unable to tell me anything definite. The vessels in the harbour were either coast guard ships or merchant boats which had not even begun loading. "Perhaps there will be a packet boat in three or four days," the commandant said, "and then we shall see." I returned to my lodgings morose and angry. My Cossack met me at the door with a scared look on his face.

"Looks bad, sir! " he said.

"Yes, my friend. The Lord knows when we shall get away! " Now he looked still more worried. Bending toward me, he whispered:

"It's uncanny here! Today I met a Cossack sergeant I know, we were in the same detachment last year. When I told him where we'd stopped he said to me: 'Brother, it's unclean there; the people are no good! ' And, come to think of it, what sort of a fellow is this blind chap? Goes everywhere alone, to the market, for bread, and to fetch water. You can see they're used to that sort of thing here."

"What of it? Has the mistress of the house appeared at least?"

"While you were out an old woman came with her daughter."

"What daughter? She has no daughter."

"God knows who she is then. The old woman is in the hut now."

I went inside. A hot fire was burning in the stove, and a dinner rather sumptuous for poor folk was cooking. To all my questions the old woman replied that she was deaf and could not hear me. What could I do? I addressed

the blind boy, who was sitting in front of the stove feeding brushwood into the fire. "Now tell me, you blind imp," said I, taking hold of his ear, "where did you go last night with that bundle, eh?" He burst into tears and began howling and wailing: "Where'd I go? Nowhere. And I don't know of any bundle." This time the old woman heard what was going on and began to grumble: "Of all the things to imagine, and about the poor wretch, too! Why can't you leave him alone? What has he done to you?" This disgusted me and I walked out firmly resolved to find the key to the riddle.

I wrapped my cloak around me and sat down on a boulder beside the wall, gazing into the distance. Before me spread the sea agitated by last night's gale, and its monotonous roar like the murmuring of a city falling into slumber reminded me of bygone years, carrying my thoughts to the North, to our frigid capital. Stirred by memories I forgot all else. An hour and perhaps more passed thus. Suddenly something like a song caught my ear. It was a song, and the voice was pleasant, feminine, but where did it come from? I listened to it; it was a strange melody, now slow and plaintive, now fast and lively. I looked around, but saw no one; I listened again, and the sound seemed to drop from the heavens. I looked up, and on the roof of the hut I saw a girl in a striped dress, a real mermaid with loosened tresses. Shading her eyes from the sun with her hand, she was peering into the distance, now smiling and talking to herself, now picking up the song again.

I memorised the song word for word:

Over boundless billows green,
Over billows surging,
Fly the ships with sails a-spread,
Onward urging.
There among those ships at sea,
Sails my shallop sprightly,
Curtsying to wind and wave,
Kissed by combers lightly.
Stormy winds begin to blow,
Stately ships a-rocking,
Widely do they spread their wings—

To leeward flocking.
The angry ocean then I pray,
Bending low before him:
"Spare my barque, O fearsome one! "—
Thus do I implore him. —
"Precious goods are stowed on board! —
Fierce the sea is foaming! —
Keep her safe— a madcap steers
Through the gloaming! "

It occurred to me that I had heard the same voice the night before. For a moment I was lost in thought, and when I looked up at the roof again, the girl was no longer there. Suddenly she tripped past me, singing a different tune; snapping her fingers, she ran in to the old woman, and I heard their voices rise in argument. The old woman grew very angry but the girl merely laughed aloud. A short while later my mermaid came skipping along again. As she approached me she paused and looked me straight in the eyes, as if surprised at finding me there. Then she turned away carelessly and went quietly down to the boat landing. This, however, was not the end of it: all day long she hovered around my quarters, singing and skipping about without a moment's respite. She was a strange creature indeed. There was nothing foolish about her expression; on the contrary, her eyes inspected me with keen penetration, they seemed to be endowed with some magnetic power, and each glance appeared to invite a question, but as soon as I opened my mouth to speak she ran away, smiling artfully.

Never had I seen a woman like her. She was far from beautiful, though I have my preconceived notions as regards beauty as well. There was much of the thoroughbred in her, and in women as in horses that is a great thing: this discovery belongs to young France. It (I mean pedigree, not young France) is betrayed mainly by the walk and by the hands and feet, and particularly indicative is the nose. In Russia a classic nose is rarer than small feet. My songstress looked no more than eighteen. Her extraordinarily graceful figure, the peculiar way she had of tilting her head, her long auburn hair, the golden sheen of her slightly sun-tanned neck and shoulders, and especially her finely chisel-

led nose enchanted me. Though I could read something wild and suspicious in her sidelong glances and though there was something indefinable in her smile, the preconceived notions got the better of me. The chiselled nose carried me off my feet, and I fancied I had found Goethe's Mignon, that queer figment of his German imagination. And indeed, there was much in common between the two, the same swift transitions from supreme agitation to utter immobility, the same puzzling conversation, the same gambolling and the same strange songs...

Toward evening I stopped her in the doorway and engaged her in the following conversation:

"Tell me, my pretty one," I asked, "what were you doing on the roof today?" "Looking where the wind blows from." "Why?" "Whence the wind blows, thence happiness." "Indeed, were you invoking happiness by song?" "Where there is a song there is also good fortune." "Supposing you sing grief for yourself?" "What of it? If things will not be better, they'll be worse, and then it's not so far from bad to good." "Who taught you that song?" "No one taught it to me. I sing whatever comes to my mind; he to whom I sing will hear; others will not understand." "What is your name, my nightingale?" "Whoever named me knows." "And who named you?" "How should I know?" "You are sly! But I've learned something about you." There was no change in her expression, not even a trembling of her lips, as if it all were no concern of hers. "I know that you went down to the shore last night." Assuming an air of importance I told her everything I had seen, hoping to disconcert her, but in vain! She only burst out laughing. "You saw a lot but know little; and what you do know you'd best keep under lock and key." "Supposing I took it into my head to report to the commandant?" I adopted a very serious, even severe mien. Suddenly she bounded off and began singing, disappearing like a bird frightened into flight. My last remark was entirely out of place, though at the time I did not suspect its full purport and only later had occasion to regret ever having made it.

It was already dark and I told the Cossack to put on the kettle, lighted a candle and sat at the table smoking my travelling pipe. I was already finishing my second glass of

tea when the door suddenly creaked and I heard the soft rustle of a dress and light footsteps behind me. I started and turned around. It was she, my undine! She sat down opposite me without a word and looked at me with eyes that for some unfathomable reason seemed full of sweet tenderness; they reminded me of eyes that years before had so despotically ruled my life. She seemed to wait for me to speak, but I was too confused to say a word. The deathly pallor of her face betrayed the tumult within her; her hand aimlessly wandered over the table and I noticed that it trembled; now her bosom rose high, now she seemed to be holding her breath. The comedy began to pall and I was ready to cut it short in the most prosaic fashion by offering her a glass of tea when she jumped up, entwined her arms around my neck and planted a moist, fiery kiss on my lips. Everything went dark before my eyes, my head swam, and I embraced her with all my youthful passion, but she slipped like a serpent from my arms, whispering in my ear: "Meet me on the shore tonight after everyone is asleep," and ran out of the room as swift as an arrow. In the passageway she upset the tea-kettle and the candle standing on the floor. "She-devil!" shouted the Cossack, who had made himself comfortable on some straw and was intending to warm himself with the tea I had left. I came to myself with a start.

Some two hours later when all was quiet I roused my Cossack. "If you hear a pistol shot," I told him, "run down to the waterfront." He opened his eyes wide but replied mechanically: "Yes, sir." I stuck a pistol under my belt and went out. She was waiting for me at the top of the slope, more than flimsily clad, a small shawl tied around her slender form.

"Follow me," she said, taking me by the hand, and we started down the incline. I do not know how I managed not to break my neck. At the bottom we turned to the right and took the path along which I had followed the blind boy the night before. The moon had not risen yet, and only two stars like two distant lighthouses shone in the dark blue sky. The swell came in at even, regular intervals, barely lifting the lone boat moored to the shore. "Let's get into the boat," said my companion. I hesitated, for I have no predilection for sentimental sea jaunts, but this was not the time to retreat. She jumped into the boat and I followed, and

before I knew it we had cast off. "What does this mean?" I asked, angrily now. "It means," she said as she pushed me on to a seat and wrapped her arms around me, "that I love you." She pressed her cheek against mine and I felt her breath hot on my face. Suddenly something splashed into the water; I reached for my belt, but the pistol was gone. Now a terrible suspicion crept into my heart and the blood rushed to my head. Looking around I saw we were already some fifty sazhen from the shore, and I unable to swim! I wanted to push her away, but she clung to my clothes like a cat, then gave me a sharp push that nearly threw me overboard. The boat rocked dangerously, but I regained my balance, and a desperate struggle began between us. Fury gave me strength, but I soon noticed that my adversary was more agile than I. "What do you want?" I shouted, gripping her small hands. I could hear her fingers crack, but she did not cry out; her snakelike nature was superior to the pain.

"You saw us," she replied, "and you will report on us." With a superhuman effort she forced me against the gunwale until we both hung perilously over the water and her hair dipped into it. The moment was decisive. I braced my knee against the side of the boat and seized her by the hair with one hand and the throat with the other. She let go of my clothes and in a flash I had hurled her into the sea.

It was already quite dark and after seeing her head bob up a couple of times in the foam I lost sight of her completely.

I found a piece of an old oar at the bottom of the boat, and after a great deal of effort managed to get to the landing. As I was making my way along the shore back to the hut, my eyes turned toward the spot where the blind boy had waited for the nocturnal boatman the night before. The moon was coming up and in its light I thought I saw a white-garbed figure sitting on the shore. Spurred on by curiosity I crept toward it and lay down in the grass on top of a bluff rising from the shore; by raising my head slightly I could observe everything that happened below, and I was neither too surprised nor sorry to find my mermaid there. She was wringing the sea water from her hair, and I noticed how her wet clothes outlined her lithe form and high bosom.

Soon a boat appeared in the distance and quickly approached the shore. Like the night before, a man stepped out of it wearing a Tartar cap, though his hair was cropped in Cossack fashion, and he had a large knife stuck under his belt. "Yanko," she said, "everything is lost!" They continued talking, but in so low a voice that I could not hear a word. "And where is the blind one?" Yanko finally asked in a louder tone. "I sent him off," was the reply. A few minutes later the blind boy appeared carrying a bag on his back. This was put into the boat.

"Listen, blind one," said Yanko, "take care of that spot, you know what I mean? There's a wealth of goods there... And tell (the name I could not make out) that I am no longer his servant. Things have turned out badly and he'll see me no more. It's dangerous to go on. I'm going to look for work elsewhere; he won't find another daredevil like me. And tell him that had he paid more generously Yanko wouldn't have left him. I can always make my way wherever the wind blows and the sea roars!" After a brief pause, Yanko continued: "I'll take her with me, for she can't stay behind, and tell the old woman it's time she died; she's lived long enough and ought to know when her time's up. She'll never see us again."

"What about me?" the blind boy whimpered.

"What do I need you for?" was the answer.

In the meantime my undine had jumped into the boat and was waving to her comrade. Yanko put something into the blind boy's hand and muttered: "Here, buy yourself some ginger cakes." "Is that all?" asked the blind one. "All right, take this too." The coin rang as it fell on the stones. The blind boy did not pick it up. Yanko got into the boat, and as the wind was blowing out to sea, they raised a small sail and quickly slipped into the distance. For a long time the white sail was visible among the dark waves in the moonlight. The blind boy remained sitting on the shore, and I heard something that sounded like sobbing: it was the blind boy weeping, and he wept for a long, long time... A sadness came over me. Why did fate have to throw me into the peaceful lives of *honest smugglers*? Like a stone hurled into the placid surface of a well I had disturbed their tranquility, and like a stone had nearly gone to the bottom myself!

I returned to my quarters. In the passage a candle spluttered its last on a wooden platter, while my Cossack, orders notwithstanding, was fast asleep gripping a gun with both hands. I did not disturb him, and picking up the candle went into the room. But alas, my box, silverinlaid sabre and Daghestan dagger which I had received as a present from a friend had vanished. Now I guessed what the confounded blind boy had carried. Rousing the Cossack with scant ceremony, I swore at him, but there was nothing that could be done about it any more. And would it not have been ludicrous for me to complain to my superiors that I had been robbed by a blind boy and that an eighteen-year-old girl had all but drowned me?

Thank God an opportunity offered itself the following morning to travel farther, and I left Taman. What happened later to the old woman and the poor blind boy, I do not know. And, after all, what have human joys and sorrows to do with me, an itinerant officer, and one travelling on official business to boot!

1840

Translated by Martin Parker

NIKOLAI GOGOL

(1809–1852)

Gogol's influence on Russian literature can hardly be overestimated. His very first book—a cycle of stories called "Village Evenings Near Dikanka" (1831–1832)—was acclaimed by everyone at once. With the publication of "Mirgorod" (1835) and "St. Petersburg Stories" Gogol came to be ranked with the leading Russian authors. In 1836 he wrote to the poet Vassily Zhukovsky: "I can truthfully say that I never made a sacrifice of my talent for high living. No amusements, no passion could ever for a minute distract me from my duty."

Critic Nikolai Chernyshevsky said: "It is a long time since there has been a writer in the world who'd be as important for his nation as Gogol is for Russia."

Alexander Pushkin, who encouraged and supported Gogol when he first began to write, was impressed by his distinctive creative method and his talent for representing what was vulgar in life so vividly, and the worthlessness of the worthless so powerfully, that all this triteness which one was apt to overlook leapt to the eye at once.

Gogol's legacy is enormous and varied: there are his gay, sparkling "Village Evenings Near Dikanka", his "St. Petersburg Stories"

("Nevsky Prospekt", "The Greatcoat" and "Notes of a Madman") infused with deep-felt pain and sympathy for the little man; there are his satirical comedies exposing Russia's officialdom "The Inspector-General," and his "Dead Souls" which may be called an encyclopedia of mid-nineteenth century Russian life. The variety of genres and styles is truly astonishing.

Gogol inherited and carried on Pushkin's traditions in literature, in his turn unquestionably influenced such different writers as Dostoyevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Leskov, Nekrasov, Grigorovich, Andrei Bely, and Alexei Remizov.

What Gogol had meant for Russian literature was splendidly expressed by Chernyshevsky: "Gogol was proud and vain, but he had a right to be proud of his brain, of his genius, of his passionate desire to be of use to his country and to Russian society as a whole. He told us what we were like, what we were wanting in, what we should strive for, what we should shun and what to love. His whole life was a passionate struggle against ignorance and rudeness, the inspiring and constant aim of his life being to work for good of his country."

On March 25 a most extraordinary occurrence took place in St. Petersburg. The barber Ivan Yakovlevich, resident of Voznesensky Avenue (his surname has been lost, and does not even appear on his shop sign, which depicts a gentleman with a well-soaped cheek and the legend: "Blood-letting also performed"), the barber Ivan Yakovlevich woke up early one morning and caught the smell of hot bread. Raising himself slightly on his bed he saw that his wife, a most respectable lady, with a great partiality for coffee, was drawing freshly baked loaves from the oven.

"Today, Praskovya Osipovna, I shall not drink coffee," announced Ivan Yakovlevich: "instead I would like to eat a hot loaf with onion." (In fact, Ivan Yakovlevich would have liked coffee too, but he knew that it would be totally futile to ask for both at once, for Praskovya Osipovna took a very dim view of such caprices). "Let the old fool eat bread, all the better for me," thought his wife: "I'll get an extra cup of coffee." And she tossed a loaf on to the table.

For the sake of decency Ivan Yakovlevich put a coat on top of his night shirt, and seating himself at the table, poured out some salt, peeled two onions, took hold of a knife and, with an air of the utmost gravity, set about slicing his loaf. Cutting it in half he glanced inside and, to his great surprise, saw something white. He cautiously prodded it with his knife and poked at it with his finger. "Feels firm..." he thought, "what on earth can it be?"

He stuck in his fingers and pulled out— a nose! .. At this his hands fell to his sides; he then rubbed his eyes and felt the object: yes, a nose, no doubt about it! and even, it

seemed, a familiar nose. An expression of horror crept over Ivan Yakovlevich's face. But this horror was nothing compared to the indignation that overtook his lady wife.

"Where did you cut off that nose, you butcher?" she shrieked, livid with rage. "You villain! Drunkard! I'll report you to the police myself. Downright criminal! I've already been told by three people how you tug at their noses so hard while you're shaving them that it's a wonder they stay on at all."

But Ivan Yakovlevich was struck dumb. He had recognized the nose as belonging to none other than Collegiate Assessor Kovalev*, whom he shaved every Wednesday and Sunday.

"Wait, Praskovya Osipovna! I'll wrap it up in a cloth and put it over there in the corner: let it sit there for a little while, then I'll take it away."

"Not another word! You think that I'd allow a cut-off nose to sit in my room? You numskull! All you're good at is stropping your razor, and soon you won't be able to do your job properly at all, you stupid oaf! You scoundrel! You think I'm going to stand up for you to the police?.. No fear, you good-for-nothing, you blockhead! Take it away! Away! Wherever you like, just don't let me set eyes on it again! "

Ivan Yakovlevich stood there dumbfounded. He racked his brains, feeling utterly flummoxed. "Devil knows how it happened," he said finally, scratching behind his ear. "Perhaps I came home drunk last night, or perhaps not, I can't say. But on the face of it this is altogether ridiculous; I mean, bread is something you bake and a nose is nothing of the kind. It's a mystery to me! .." Ivan Yakovlevich fell silent. The thought of the police finding him with the nose and arresting him terrified him. He could already see in his mind's eye the red collar, with its fine silver braiding, the sword... and he shuddered from head to toe. Finally he picked up his undershirt and boots, pulled them on and, to the accompaniment of Praskovya Osipovna's baleful injunctions, he wrapped the nose in a cloth and stepped out onto the street.

He wanted to secrete it away somewhere, perhaps

* According to the Table of Ranks a Collegiate Assessor was in the 8th Grade and equivalent to the military rank of Major.

sticking it behind a curbstone by the gates or inadvertently dropping it somewhere, and then popping down the nearest side-street. But to his chagrin he kept on bumping into acquaintances, who pestered him: "Where are you going?" or: "Who are you going to shave at this early hour?" leaving Ivan Yakovlevich no chance to carry out his scheme. Once he did manage to drop it, but a duty policeman called to him, pointing with his halberd: "Hey, you! You've dropped something!" And Ivan Yakovlevich had to pick the nose up and stuff it in his pocket. He was beginning to despair because the street was filling with people as the shops and stalls opened for the day.

He decided to make for the Isakievsky bridge, where, with luck, he'd be able to throw it into the Neva... But I have been guilty of a slight oversight here, in that I have so far omitted to tell you anything about Ivan Yakovlevich, a person commanding esteem in many respects.

Ivan Yakovlevich, like every self-respecting Russian craftsman, was a frightful drunkard. And although every day of the week he shaved other people's chins, his own was invariably unshaven. Ivan Yakovlevich's tails (for Ivan Yakovlevich never wore a frock coat) was pie-bald, that is it was black, but covered in yellowy-brown and grey blotches; the collar was shiny, and instead of three buttons there were only threads dangling in front. Ivan Yakovlevich was a great cynic, and when, as was his wont, Collegiate Assessor Kovalev remarked to him during his shave: "Ivan Yakovlevich, your hands always stink!" Ivan Yakovlevich would retort: "I don't see how they could."—"I don't know, old man, but they do," the Collegiate Assessor would say, and Ivan Yakovlevich, taking a pinch of snuff, would counter this by soaping him on his cheeks, under his nose, behind his ears, and beneath his chin, in other words, wherever he fancied.

This worthy citizen had by now reached the Isakievsky bridge. First of all he looked round; then leaned over the railings as if to look under the bridge, to ascertain whether there were a lot of fish that day, and stealthily dropped the cloth containing the nose. He felt as though a ton weight had been lifted from his shoulders: Ivan Yakovlevich even chuckled. Instead of going back to shave the chins of

civil servants he turned his steps towards an establishment fronted by the sign: "Victuals and Tea" to order a glass of punch, when he suddenly noticed at the other end of the bridge a police superintendent, of imposing appearance, with mutton-chop whiskers, a tricorn hat and a sword. He froze in his tracks; meanwhile the police superintendent cocked his finger at him and said: "Stop over here, my good man! "

Ivan Yakovlevich, knowing the correct procedure in such circumstances, took off his cap while still a good way off and, stepping up briskly, said: "Very good day to you, Your Honour! "

"No, no, my friend, never mind the 'Your Honour', but tell me now, what were you doing over there on the bridge, eh?"

"Honest to God, Sir, I was on my way to see a customer, and I thought I'd have a look at how quickly the river was flowing."

"You're lying! Don't think you'll get away with that. Let's hear the truth then! "

"I would be happy to shave your Honour twice a week, or even three times, without a murmur," answered Ivan Yakovlevich.

"No, my friend, that's not good enough. I already have three barbers to shave me, and they all regard it as a great honour. But now let's hear what you were up to?"

Ivan Yakovlevich blanched... But at this point proceedings become enshrouded in fog, and we know absolutely nothing of what ensued.

II

Collegiate Assessor Kovalev awoke fairly early and breathed out: "brrr! .." as he always did on awakening, for no reason apparent even to himself. He stretched and called for the small mirror which stood on the dressing table. He wanted to have a look at the pimple which had appeared on his nose the previous night: but to his greatest astonishment he saw that where his nose should have been there was a flat space! Taking fright, he asked for some

water and rubbed his eyes with a towel: it was true, there was no nose! He pinched himself, to make sure he was not still asleep. But it seemed he was not asleep. Collegiate Assessor Kovalev leapt from his bed, and shook himself: no nose! .. He at once called for his clothes and dashed off in the direction of the Police Commissioner's office.

But in the meantime we must acquaint the reader with Kovalev, so that he can see for himself what sort of man our collegiate assessor was. The collegiate assessors who receive this rank with the help of various academic certificates, are not on any account to be compared with those collegiate assessors who acquire their position in the Caucasus*. These are two completely different species. Learned collegiate assessors... But Russia is such an extraordinary place that if you say something about one collegiate assessor all its collegiate assessors, from Riga to Kamchatka, are sure to take it personally. The same holds true for all ranks and offices.— Kovalev was a Caucasian collegiate assessor. He had only held this rank for two years, and was thus still quite besotted with his newfound dignity; to give himself even greater weight and authority he always called himself major, rather than collegiate assessor. "Listen, my good woman," he would say, upon meeting a shirtvendor on the street, "come along to my place: my flat's in Sadovaya street; ask anyone where Major Kovalev lives and they'll show you." And if he should espy a particularly comely wench he would give her an additional secret commission, saying: "You just ask, my poppet, for Major Kovalev's apartment."— For this reason henceforward we too shall call our collegiate assessor major.

Major Kovalev was in the habit of taking a daily stroll along Nevsky Prospekt. The collar of his shirt was always snow-white and starched. His whiskers were of the sort which can still be seen on the cheeks of provincial surveyors, architects, regimental doctors, policemen of one sort and another, and, in general, all gentlemen endowed with full,

* In the first half of the 19th century, Russia was colonising the Caucasus. Promotion there was facilitated by irregularities and malpractices on the part of the local authorities.

ruddy cheeks and an aptitude for boston: these whiskers extend to the very middle of the cheek and thence reach right to the nose. Major Kovalev had about him a number of cornelian seals, some with crests and others with the inscription: Wednesday, Thursday, Monday and so forth. The major had come to St. Petersburg with a specific purpose, namely, to seek a position appropriate to his station. If he succeeded this would be at vice-governor level, if not he would settle for an administratorship in some important department. Neither was Major Kovalev opposed to the idea of marrying; but only on condition that his bride should possess a capital of two hundred thousand. So the reader can now judge for himself the worthy major's state of mind when he discovered, instead of a not unpresentable nose of moderate proportions, a ridiculous, empty, smooth space.

As ill luck would have it, not a single cab was to be seen on the street, and he was constrained to go on foot, wrapped in his cloak with a handkerchief covering his face, like someone with a nose-bleed. "But maybe I'm imagining it all: a nose can't disappear just like that." He went into a pastry-shop with the express object of looking into a mirror. Luckily there was no one in the shop: the waiters were sweeping out the rooms and arranging the chairs; some of them were bearing forth trays of hot pies; yesterday's coffee-stained newspapers lay about on the tables and chairs. "Well, thank God for that, there's no one here," he said, "now I can take a look." He approached the mirror timidly and looked in: "What a confounded nuisance!" he exclaimed, spitting... "If only there was something in the nose's place, but to be left with nothing! .."

Biting his lips with annoyance he left the pastry-shop and resolved to depart from his custom and not look or smile at anyone. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks by a doorway, as a most incredible phenomenon unfolded before his eyes: a carriage stopped at the entrance; the doors opened; stooping, a uniformed official sprang out and ran up the stairs. Imagine Kovalev's horror and amazement when he recognised this person as his very own nose! This extraordinary spectacle left him reeling with astonishment, and he was barely able to retain his footing; but he resolved

at all costs to await the nose's return to his carriage and remained there trembling as if in a fever. Sure enough, two minutes later the nose emerged. He wore a gold-braided uniform, with a high stiff collar; he had on buckskin breeches, and a sword hung by his side. From his plumed hat it was apparent that he pretended to the rank of state councillor*. It was also clear from his demeanour that he was on his way to pay a call. He glanced around, summoned the coachman: "Over here!", climbed in and they galloped off.

Poor Kovalev almost lost his mind. He did not know what to make of this most extraordinary occurrence. And indeed, how could you explain the fact that a nose, which the previous day had still been attached to his face, unable to ride or walk, was now wearing a uniform! He set off in pursuit of the carriage, which, fortunately, did not go far before stopping near the Kazan Cathedral.

He hastened into the cathedral, pushed his way through the row of old beggarwomen with their faces swathed in rags, leaving only two slits for the eyes, a sight which before had always caused him mirth, and entered the church. There were not many worshippers inside, and they were all clustered around the entrance. Kovalev was so distraught that he was quite unable to pray, and he eagerly scanned the church hoping for a glimpse of the uniformed gentleman. At last he saw him standing to one side. The nose had entirely concealed his face in his tall stiff collar, and was praying with an expression of utmost piety.

"How can I approach him?" thought Kovalev. "To judge by his uniform and hat he must be a state councillor. Deuce knows what I'm to do! "

He gave a cough as he drew near to him, but the nose undeterred, maintained his sanctimonious position, describing deep bows towards the altar.

"My good sir..." said Kovalev, desperately plucking up the courage: "my good sir..."

"What is it?" asked the nose, looking round.

"I am surprised, sir... I do think... you should know your place. And just look where I've found you—in a church. You must agree..."

* A high civil rank of the 5th Grade.

"Excuse me, but I find myself unable to make head or tail of what you are saying. Please explain yourself."

"How can I explain?" thought Kovalev, and once again steeling himself, began: "Of course I... actually I'm a major. And, I'm sure you agree, for me to walk around without a nose is rather unseemly. It would be all right for some market-woman, selling peeled oranges on the Voskresensky bridge to sit there with no nose; but as I'm hoping for a promotion... and moreover being acquainted with the ladies of a number of distinguished houses: with State Councillor Chekhtaryov's wife, and others... Judge for yourself... I don't quite know how to put it, sir..." (Upon which Major Kovalev shrugged his shoulders.) "Forgive me, but if you look at this strictly from the point of view of duty and honour... you must surely agree..."

"Don't understand a thing," answered the nose. "Be so good as to make yourself clear."

"My good sir..." said Kovalev in a dignified tone; "as a matter of fact I find your words hard to comprehend... It all seems quite plain to me... Or do you wish... The point is, you're my very own nose! "

The nose looked at the major and set its features in a slight frown.

"You are mistaken, my good sir. I am a person in my own right. Furthermore there cannot be any close relations between us, for to judge by the buttons on your uniform you must serve in another department." Having said this the nose turned away and continued praying.

Kovalev was now at a complete loss what to do and even what to think. Just then he heard the pleasant rustle of a lady's dress: an elderly lady walked up, festooned in a mass of lace, and accompanied by a slim creature, clad in a white dress which excellently suited her slender frame, and a pale yellow hat, as light as puff-pastry. Behind them stood a tall footman with large whiskers and a good dozen collars who proceeded to open a snuff-box.

Kovalev moved a little closer, hitched up the cambric collar of his shirt, adjusted the seals on his gold watch-chain, and, smiling to right and left, directed his attention to the slender lady, who was inclined slightly forward like a flower in the spring as she raised the almost transparent fingers of her lilywhite hand to her brow. Kovalev's smile widened

when beneath her hat he espied a round, creamy chin and a portion of her cheek, brushed with the colour of the first rose of spring. But suddenly he recoiled as if scalded. He had remembered that in place of a nose he had absolutely nothing, and tears issued from his eyes. He swung round in order to tell the uniformed gentleman in so many words that he was simply pretending to be a state councillor, that he was an impostor and a scoundrel and that he was no more nor less than his very own nose... But the nose had vanished: in the interval it had beaten a retreat, no doubt on its way to pay another call.

This plunged Kovalev into despair. He went out and stopped for a moment beneath the colonnade, peering all around him in the hope of spotting the nose. He remembered distinctly that he had been wearing a hat with a plume and a gold-braided uniform; but he had not noticed his overcoat, nor the colour of his carriage, nor his horses, nor even whether he had had a footman, and if so in what livery. Moreover was such a multitude of carriages pressing to and fro and at such a speed that he could not distinguish one from another, and in any case he would have been powerless to stop any of them. It was a splendid sunny day. There were crowds of people on Nevsky; and the pavements overflowed with a floral cascade of ladies all the way from the Politseisky bridge to the Anichkov bridge. Over there was an acquaintance, an aulic councillor, whom he addressed as lieutenant colonel, especially in front of strangers. Here he saw Yarygin, head of a department in the Senate, a great friend, who always used to render forfeit at boston when he played an eight. Nearby another major, who had also gained his assessorship in the Caucasus, beckoned to him...

"Deuce take it!" said Kovalev. "Hey, cabbie, take me straight to the Police Commissioner's!"

Kovalev climbed into a droshky and sat there shouting at the cabbie: "Double quick time, now!"

"Is the commissioner at home?" he shouted, looking into the vestibule.

"'Fraid not," answered the porter, "just gone out this moment."

"Confound it!"

"Yes," continued the porter, "it weren't all that long

ago, but he's gone. A minute or so earlier and you'd have caught him in."

Kovalev, keeping his handkerchief to his face the whole time, climbed back into his droshky and called out in a despairing voice: "Drive on! "

"Where?" asked the cabbie.

"Straight ahead! "

"How can I? There's a fork: left or right?"

This question forced Kovalev to stop and think. In his position it would be best to turn to the Board of Public Order*, not because it was directly connected with the police, but because it got things done far more quickly than did the other authorities; to seek satisfaction from the authorities in the very place where the nose claimed to serve would obviously be imprudent. It was apparent from the nose's own statements that this creature held nothing sacred and would be just as likely to lie now as it had lied before when claiming never to have set eyes on Major Kovalev. Kovalev was on the point of ordering the cabbie to proceed to the Board of Public Order when another thought struck him, namely, that this rogue and swindler, who at their very first encounter had behaved in such an unscrupulous manner, might by now have made good his escape from town. In this case all attempts to find him would either be completely futile or else might go on, which God forbid, for an entire month. Finally it was as though he received guidance from above. He decided to make straight for the newspaper office and quickly place an advertisement giving a detailed description of all its attributes, so that anyone who saw it might recover it for him, or at least inform him of its whereabouts. Having reached this decision, he ordered the cabbie to head for the newspaper office, and rained blows on his back the whole way, shouting: "Faster, you rogue! Faster, you blackguard! " "Ouch, sir! " grunted the cabbie, shaking his head and flicking the reins of his horse, which had a coat as shaggy as a poodle's. At long last the droshky stopped, and Kovalev ran panting into the small reception room where a greyhaired bespectacled clerk in an old tail-coat sat behind a desk and,

* The Board of Public Order was in charge of all the city police.

holding his quill pen in his teeth, counted a pile of copper coins that had been put before him.

"Who takes advertisements here?" shouted Kovalev. "Ah—good day! "

"Morning," said the grey-haired clerk raising his eyes for a moment and then lowering them again to his neat piles of money.

"I would like to print..."

"Just a moment. If you wouldn't mind waiting," said the clerk, writing a number down with his right hand, while moving two counters on an abacus with his left. A footman in a galloon-trimmed coat and with an appearance eloquent of his position in an aristocratic house, stood beside the desk holding a note, and feeling it incumbent upon himself to display a certain bonhomie, volunteered: "Believe me, sir, the horrible little dog isn't worth eighty kopecks, as for myself I wouldn't give you a brass button for it; but the countess loves it, loves it something terrible, and, so she's offering one hundred rubles for whoever finds it. If you want to know my honest opinion, just between you and me, there's no accounting for people's tastes: now take your hunter, he won't mind paying five hundred, even a thousand for a pointer or a retriever, but then he's paying for a good dog."

The worthy clerk listened gravely to this discourse and at the same time continued his calculations, counting the number of letters in the notice he had been brought. Around him hovered a great number of old women, shop assistants and doormen with notes. One sought employment for a coachman of sober habits; another advertised for sale a little-used trap, brought in 1814 from Paris; elsewhere a position was required for a serf-girl trained as a laundress, but suitable for other work; buyers were sought for a sturdy droshky, missing one spring, a young spirited horse with grey dappled markings, a mere seventeen years of age, new turnip and radish seeds imported from London, a country cottage with a large plot: stabling for two horses, a site in which an excellent birch or fir grove could be planted; another notice drew the attention of all those anxious to purchase old boot soles, inviting them to come to the auction rooms any day, between 8 a. m. and 3 p. m. The room in which this company was assembled was of small

proportions and the air in it was extraordinarily dense; but Collegiate Assessor Kovalev was unconscious of the atmosphere because he kept his handkerchief to his face and anyway his nose itself was at that moment God knows where.

"My good sir, really, you must... It's very important," he brought out impatiently.

"One moment! Two rubles forty three kopecks! Right away! One ruble sixty four kopecks!" commanded the grey-haired clerk, tossing pieces of paper in the faces of the old women and doormen. "What do you want?" he said at last, turning to Kovalev.

"I'd like to..." said Kovalev, "a vile act of treachery has been committed, I still can't make it out. I want you to print that the person who brings this rogue to me will be handsomely rewarded."

"Could I please have your name?"

"No, why should you need my name? I can't divulge it. I have a lot of acquaintances: State Councillor Chekh-taryov's wife, Palageya Grigoryevna Podtochina, wife of a staff officer... They might see it, God forbid! You could simply write: a collegiate assessor, or, better still, a gentleman of the rank of major."

"And the person who has escaped was one of your serfs?"

"What, one of my serfs? Oh no, far worse than that! It's my ... er—nose that's run away..."

"Hm! what a singular surname. And did this Mr. Nose swindle you out of a large sum?"

"No, nose, not... you've got it wrong! My nose, my very own nose, has gone and disappeared. It's playing some devilish trick on me! "

"But in what manner did it disappear? I'm afraid I can't quite follow all this."

"Well I don't know myself; but the main thing is that it is now driving about the city passing itself off as a state councillor. So I am asking you to place an announcement requesting that whoever catches it bring it to me forthwith and without the slightest delay. Judge for yourself: how can I go on without such a prominent part of my anatomy?—it's not as if I'd lost a little toe, and

could quickly slip my foot into my boot before anyone saw that it was missing. On Thursdays I call on State Councillor Chekhtaryov's wife; Palageya Grigoryevna Podtochina is the wife of a staff officer and she has a very pretty daughter, and they are both very good friends of mine, so you can see for yourself what a predicament I am in... I simply cannot show myself to them now."

The clerk was pensive for a moment, as was apparent from his tightly pursed lips.

"No, I can't print such an announcement in the paper," he said finally, after a long silence.

"What? Why not?"

"I can't. The newspaper could lose its reputation. If everyone were to start writing that their noses had run away, just imagine.. As it is people are saying that the paper publishes a lot of nonsense and false rumours."

"But what's nonsense about this? It's all as clear as daylight."

"That's how it seems to you. But take the following case last week. An official came in just as you have today with a note, which came to 2 rubles 73 kopecks, and all the announcement said was that a black-haired poodle had run away. On the face of it, nothing out of the ordinary. But it all ended in a libel suit, because this poodle was the cashier of some institution, I don't remember which."

"But I'm not making any announcement about a poodle, this is about my very own nose, which amounts to practically the same thing as myself."

"Sorry, I can't place such an announcement."

"Even when I really have lost my nose! "

"If that's so then it's a job for the doctors. They say that there are people who can fit you out with any nose you like. But anyway I observe that you are something of a wag and fond of practical jokes."

"I swear to you, by all that's holy! Since things have come to this pass, I'll show you! "

"Why bother! " continued the clerk, taking a pinch of snuff. "Actually, if it's not too much trouble," he added looking up in curiosity, "perhaps I might take a look."

Collegiate Assessor Kovalev removed the handkerchief from his face.

"Well, that is most extraordinary!" said the clerk. "The area is completely smooth, like a freshly cooked pancake. Extraordinarily smooth, in fact!"

"Now I hope that's put paid to your objections! You can see for yourself that the announcement has to go in. I will be extremely grateful to you, and I am very glad that this incident has brought me the pleasure of your acquaintance..." The major, as we can see, had decided at this point to try a little fawning.

"Printing it would, of course, be a simple matter," said the clerk: "only I don't see what good this can do you. If you're determined to do something about it then find someone with a flair for words, get him to write it up as a rare occurrence of nature and publish this article in the *Northern Bee*" (here he took another pinch of snuff) "for the edification of our young people" (here he wiped his nose) "or indeed for the interest of the general public."

This suggestion was the final blow. Collegiate Assessor Kovalev lowered his eyes to the newspaper where they alighted on the theatre column; his face was on the point of smiling as he caught the name of an attractive young actress, and his hand reached for his pocket to see whether he had on him a five-ruble note, for staff officers, in Kovalev's opinion, must only have seats in the stalls—but then he remembered about his nose and his heart sank!

Even the clerk, it seemed, was moved by Kovalev's plight. Wishing to offer some measure of consolation he regarded it as fitting to express his sympathy in a few words: "I am indeed most grieved that you have been the victim of such a droll accident. Perhaps you would care for a pinch of snuff? It gives relief from headaches and bucks up the spirits; it even has a beneficial effect on haemorrhoids."

Whereupon the clerk offered Kovalev his snuff-box, adroitly folding beneath it its lid which displayed a portrait of a lady in a hat.

This thoughtless gesture was more than Kovalev's patience could stand. "I do not understand how you can think this a joking matter," he said heatedly: "surely you can see that I do not in fact have the wherewithal to partake of snuff? Devil take your snuff! I cannot bear to look at the stuff, not even the best brand, to say nothing of that

Berezinsky shag." On saying this he stalked out of the newspaper office in high dudgeon and set off to see the superintendent of police, a great lover of sugar. His entire front room, which was also his dining-room, was devoted to an exhibition of loaves of sugar, which shopkeepers brought him as a token of friendship. At this moment his cook was engaged in removing from the superintendent his jackboots; his sword and all his military paraphernalia were already hanging peacefully in the corners of the room and his three-year-old son was playing with his father's awe-inspiring tricorne hat, while the warrior himself, after his day in the throes of battle, prepared to savour the delights of peace.

Kovalev was ushered in to him at the very moment when, after a good stretch and grunt, he announced: "Ahhh, how for a cracking two hour nap!" Thus we can see that the collegiate assessor had timed his arrival extremely badly. And I suspect that even if he had brought with him a few pounds of tea or a roll of cloth he still would not have received a particularly effusive welcome. The superintendent was a great champion of both the arts and commerce in all their forms: but most of all he favoured the state banknote. "Now that's what I like," he was wont to say: "you can't beat one of these: it doesn't need feeding, takes up little space, there's always room for it in the pocket, and if you drop it it won't break."

The superintendent received Kovalev rather coldly and remarked that after dinner is not the time to carry out an investigation, that nature itself has ordained that after eating our fill we should rest a little (from which the collegiate assessor could see that the police superintendent was familiar with the utterances of the ancient sages), that a respectable person will not be thus rudely parted from his nose and that there were majors and majors in this world, some of whom do not even have a decent shirt to their name and frequent the most disreputable places.

This, alas, was Kovalev's Achilles' heel! We should note that the collegiate assessor was an extremely touchy person. He could forgive anything that was said about his person but not disrespect for his rank or post. He even argued that in theatrical performances you could permit any references to subalterns, but remarks about staff officers were definite-

ly not on. The superintendent's reception so took him aback that he shook his head and pronounced in a dignified tone, holding out his arms: "I regret that after such offensive remarks on your part I am unable to make any further comment..." and departed.

He returned home, barely able to hold himself on his feet. Dusk had already fallen. After all this long, futile search his flat struck him as forlorn and totally uninviting. When he entered the hall he saw his footman Ivan lying on the grubby leather couch aiming gobs of spit at a point on the ceiling, a target which he hit with some measure of success. The man's torpor enraged the collegiate assessor; whacking him over the head with his hat, he shouted: "You're always loafing about, you swine! "

Ivan at once sprang to his feet and flew to his master's side to help him off with his cloak.

On entering his room the major sank exhausted and mournful into an armchair and after heaving a few sighs said at last:

"My God, O my God! What have I done to deserve this? If only I had lost an arm or a leg—it would have been far better; or even my ears—that would have been hard, but at least bearable; but without his nose a man is nothing: neither man nor beast, but God knows what! Just some rubbish to be thrown out of the window! And even if I'd lost it in the war or in a duel, or if I had lost it through some fault of my own; but it disappeared without rhyme or reason, just like that. But no, it can't be," he added after a moment's thought. "It's most unlikely that a nose should disappear; totally improbable. I'm either dreaming it, or imagining it; perhaps instead of water I drank the vodka which I use to rub my skin after shaving. That fool Ivan didn't clear it away, and I must have picked it up."

To make absolutely sure that he wasn't drunk the major pinched himself so painfully that he even cried out. This pain convinced him that he was quite fully awake. He stole up to the mirror screwing his eyes up in the hope that his nose would reappear in its rightful place; but on seeing his reflection he leapt back, exclaiming, "What a ridiculous sight! "

It really was quite incomprehensible. This was not like

losing a button, a silver spoon, a watch or something of that sort;—but to lose his own nose, and moreover in his own flat! .. Major Kovalev pondered over all the circumstances, and decided that the most likely culprit behind it all was none other than staff officer Podtochin's wife, who wished him to marry her daughter. He did in fact enjoy flirting with the girl, but carefully avoided any definite commitment. When the staff officer's wife announced in so many words that she wished to marry her daughter to him he had cautiously extricated himself with a shower of compliments, saying that he was still too young, that he would have to serve another five years, until he attained the right age of forty-two. And so the staff officer's wife, clearly out of a desire for revenge, had decided to ruin him and hired for this purpose the services of witches, because it was quite inconceivable that his nose had been cut off: no one had entered his room; his barber Ivan Yakovlevich had last shaved him on Wednesday and throughout all Wednesday and even all of Thursday his nose had been intact,—this he remembered and was perfectly convinced of; moreover he would have felt the pain, and there was no question of the wound healing so quickly and becoming as smooth as a pancake. He started making plans: should he take the staff officer's wife to court through official channels or go to see her and accuse her to her face. These reflections were interrupted by the light which appeared through the chinks of the door, and informed him that Ivan had already lit the candle in the front room. Soon Ivan himself appeared, bearing the candle before him and lighting up the entire room. Kovalev's first reaction was to seize his handkerchief and cover that empty space which only the day before had contained a nose, so that his idiot manservant would not stand there gaping.

No sooner had Ivan come into the room than a strange voice could be heard in the hall enquiring: "Is this the residence of Collegiate Assessor Kovalev?"

"Come in. Major Kovalev at your service," said Kovalev, leaping to his feet and opening the door.

Through it came a police constable of smart appearance, with whiskers neither a shade too light nor too dark and fairly full cheeks—the very same official whom we met at the beginning of the story on the Isakievsky bridge.

"Am I right in thinking that Your Honour has lost his nose?"

"You are."

"It has now been located."

"What do you say?" shouted Major Kovalev. Then, speechless with joy, he stared pop-eyed at the police constable standing before him, whose full lips and cheeks seemed to dance in the bright light of the candle. "How did you find it?"

"By pure chance: he was just about to flee when we intercepted him. He had already mounted the stage-coach and was bound for Riga. His passport was an old one in the name of some official. Another strange thing is that at first I took him for a person. But luckily I had my glasses with me, and saw at once that he was a nose. You see, I'm short-sighted, and if you were to stand right in front of me I would only see that you had a face, but I would be unable to make out anything like a nose, or beard. My mother-in-law, the wife's mother, that is, can't see anything either."

Kovalev was beside himself with excitement. "But where is it? Where? I'll go along at once."

"No need to bother. Knowing that you'd be needing it I brought it along with me. And the strange thing is that the main culprit in this business is that rogue of a barber on Voznesenskaya Street, who is at present sitting in the police station. I've had my suspicions of him for a long time for drunkenness and theft, and only two days ago he swiped a big buttoncard from a stall. Your nose is exactly as it left you." On saying this the constable put his hand in his pocket and took out a nose wrapped in paper.

"That's it!" exclaimed Kovalev. "The very one! Won't you join me in a cup of tea today?"

"Greatly honoured, but I'm afraid I can't: I have to go on from here to the penitentiary... Terrible the way prices are going up... The mother-in-law lives with us—that is, the wife's mother, and then there're the children: the oldest one is particularly promising: such a bright lad, but we haven't a brass kopeck for his education."

Kovalev at once knew what he was getting at, and taking up a 10-ruble note from his desk pressed it into the constables's hand; the latter went out through the door with a low

bow, and the very next moment Kovalev could hear him on the street outside, delivering a physical admonition to some stupid peasant who had ridden his cart right onto the pavement.

On the departure of the constable the collegiate assessor sat in a stupor for a few moments, so overwhelmed by this sudden stroke of good fortune that it took him quite some time to regain awareness of his surroundings. Finally, he gingerly took up the recovered nose in his cupped hands and once again examined it closely.

"It's it, the very one!" he said. "There's the pimple on the left which popped up yesterday." The major all but laughed for joy.

But nothing lasts long in this life, and in the second minute our raptures of joy are never as intense as in the first; by the third minute they subside altogether and our soul returns to its usual state, just as a ripple created by a falling stone eventually merges with the smooth surface of the water around it. Kovalev began to ponder and realised that the affair was not yet resolved: the nose had been found, but it still had to be stuck on, returned to its proper place.

"And what if it won't stick?"

As he posed this question to himself, the major blanched.

He dashed across to the dressing table in a panic and pulled the mirror closer, to be sure that he stuck the nose on straight. His hands trembled as, with minute care, he placed it in its former position. Horror! The nose would not stick! .. He held it to his mouth, warmed it a little with his breath, and once again placed it on the smooth expanse between his two cheeks; but the nose would not stay in place for a moment.

"Now, you... Stay put, you fool!" he commanded it. But the nose was as stiff as wood and fell to the table with a strange noise, as if it were made of cork. The major's face twitched convulsively. "Surely it will stick," he said in fright. But however many times he set it in its place, all his efforts were in vain.

He called Ivan and sent him for the doctor, who lived in the same building, renting the best flat on the first floor. This doctor was a distinguished-looking man, with splendid coal-black whiskers, and a bonny, blooming wife; he

ate fresh apples in the morning and kept his mouth remarkably clean, gargling for almost three quarters of an hour every morning and polishing his teeth with five different kinds of toothbrush. The doctor appeared immediately. Having asked how long ago the misfortune occurred, he lifted Major Kovalev's head by the chin and thrust his thumb so hard into that part of his face which had previously housed a nose that the Major recoiled and banged his head against the wall. This, the doctor said, was nothing, and advised him to move away from the wall. Thereupon he bade him incline his head first to the right, and after feeling the place where the nose had been, said "Hm! " Then he told him to incline his head to the left and, with another "Hm! " gave him another prod with his thumb, causing Major Kovalev to toss his head like a horse having its teeth examined. After this test the doctor shook his head and said: "No, it cannot be done. You would be better advised to leave it as it is, or you might make it worse. It could of course be stuck on, and I could do it right now; but I assure you that it would only be worse for you."

"Now that's capital! and how am I to go on without a nose?" protested Kovalev. "It can't be any worse than it is now. The devil only knows what this is! Where can I show my face in such a preposterous state? I move in the best circles, and even tonight I'm expected at two houses. I have many acquaintances: State Councillor Chekharyov's wife, Podtochina, the wife of a staff officer... although after this exploit of hers I shall have nothing more to do with her other than through the police. I implore you," he pleaded: "can it not be done? stick it on any old way; even if it's not very secure, just so long as it stays on; I could even prop it up with my hand at dangerous moments. I should add that I never dance, and so won't knock it off with any careless movement. You may be assured that I shall certainly express my gratitude for your visit, within the limits of my means..."

"Believe me," said the doctor in a voice neither loud nor quiet but extraordinarily compelling and magnetic: "that I never treat people out of a desire for personal gain. This is contrary to my code and my art. I do admittedly accept a fee for visits, but only in order not to offend my patients

by my refusal. Of course, I could stick on your nose, but I assure you on my honour, in case you don't trust my word, that the result will be far worse. You would do better to trust to the action of nature. Wash often with cold water, and I can assure you that without a nose you will be just as healthy as if you did have one. And I advise you to preserve the nose in a jar of spirit, or better still to add two table spoons of pepper vodka and warm vinegar— and then you'll be able to get a reasonable price for it. I'll even take it myself, if your price isn't too steep."

"No, no! I shan't sell it for any price! " shouted Major Kovalev in despair, "I'd sooner it rotted away! "

"So sorry," said the doctor, bowing, "I only wanted to be of service... Well, there we are then! At any rate, you can't say I haven't tried."

On saying this the doctor stalked out of the room with a dignified air. Kovalev had not even looked at his face, and in his trance-like state had only noticed the cuffs of his shirt, as white and pure as driven snow, peeking forth from the sleeves of his black tailcoat.

The very next day he decided, before lodging an official complaint, to write to the staff officer's wife, asking whether she would not agree amicably to return to him what rightfully was his. The letter read as follows:

"Dear Madame Alexandra Grigorievna,

"I find myself unable to understand the strangeness of your behaviour. You may be assured that by acting in this manner you stand to gain nothing and in no way will force me to marry your daughter. Believe me, I am perfectly well aware of the whole business behind my nose as well as that you and no one else are the main protagonist in this affair. Its sudden separation from its proper place, its flight and disguise, first as a government official, then as itself, are no more nor less than the results of sorcerous actions performed by yourself or those engaged in similarly refined pursuits. For my part I regard it incumbent upon me to warn you that if today my above-mentioned nose is not back in its proper place I shall be forced to have recourse to the patronage and protection of the law.

"Nonetheless with my utmost respect, I have the honour to be

"your humble servant

"Platon Kovalev".

"My Dear Platon Kuzmich,

"I was most astounded by your letter. In all frankness there was something quite unexpected, particularly with regard to the undeserved reproaches on your part. I can assure you that I have never received in my house the official you mention, neither in disguise, nor in his real aspect. Admittedly Philipp Ivanovich Potanchikov has paid calls on us. And while it is true that he did seek the hand of my daughter, and is himself of a fine, sober disposition and a man of great learning, I have never given him any encouragement whatever. You also make mention of a nose. If by this you mean to say that I am, as it were, turning up my nose at you, that is, rejecting you out of hand: then I am surprised that you yourself should bring this up, since I, as you are aware, was of a directly contrary opinion, and if you were now to seek the hand of my daughter in the legitimate way I would be prepared forthwith to agree to your request, for this has always been the object of my most earnest desire, in the hope of which I am eternally at your service

"Alexandra Podtochina."

"No," said Kovalev, putting down the letter. "She is definitely not guilty. She can't be! No one guilty of a crime could have written such a letter!" The collegiate assessor was knowledgeable about these matters because a few times while serving in the Caucasus he had conducted prosecutions. "How on earth did this all happen? The devil only knows!" he exclaimed at last, dropping his hands.

Meanwhile rumours about this extraordinary occurrence were circulating around the capital, and, as is usual, not without certain embellishments. At that time people's minds were particularly receptive to all manner of extraordinary phenomena: shortly before this the entire city had been preoccupied with experiments with magnetism. In addition a story had recently done the rounds about dancing chairs in Konyushenny Street, thus it was hardly surpris-

ing that before long rumour had Assessor Kovalev's nose taking a daily stroll along Nevsky Prospekt at 3 o'clock sharp. Every day a large crowd of inquisitive on-lookers would gather. Someone said that the nose had been seen at Junker's store, and such a crush of people collected around the shop that the police had to be called in. One entrepreneur, of respectable appearance, complete with whiskers, who sold various dried confections at the entrance to the theatre, specially made some fine, sturdy benches on which he invited inquisitive members of the public to stand for a fee of 80 kopeks per person. A certain distinguished colonel made a specially early start from home and forced his way through the crowd with great difficulty; but, to his great annoyance, in the shop window he saw, not a nose, but an ordinary woolen jersey and a lithograph depicting a girl adjusting her stocking whilst being observed from behind a tree by a dandy wearing a cut-away waist-coat and a goatee beard—a picture which had hung in the same spot for more than ten years. Stalking off he announced huffily: "How can people be allowed to spread such ridiculous and far-fetched rumours?"

Then a rumour sprang up that Major Kovalev's nose took its walk not on Nevsky Prospekt but in the Tavrichesky Gardens, and that it had done so for a long time; and that when Persian envoy Khozrev Mirza had lived there he had been most amazed by this strange freak of nature. Some of the students from the Surgical Academy set off for this spot. A certain respected lady of noble extraction wrote a special letter to the warden of the park asking him to show her children this rare phenomenon, and, if possible, to provide an edifying and admonitory elucidation for the young people's benefit.

All those habitués of receptions and other socialités who so love to amuse the ladies, were extremely pleased about these happenings, as their resources of entertainment had been totally exhausted. A small number of respectable and law-abiding citizens were extremely displeased. One gentleman announced with annoyance that he failed to understand how in the present enlightened age such ridiculous fictions could gain currency, and that he was surprised that the government were not attending to the

matter. This gentleman clearly belonged to that class of citizenry who would like to involve the government in everything, even their everyday quarrels with their wives. After this ... but at this point the incident is enshrouded in a mist, and what ensued is totally unknown.

III

The most absurd things happen in life. Sometimes they defy all the laws of verisimilitude: one day the very same nose which had been riding around with the rank of State Councillor and which created such a stir in the city reappeared, as if nothing had happened, in its rightful place, i.e. midway between Major Kovalev's two cheeks. This took place on April the 7th. Waking up and accidentally glimpsing himself in the mirror what did he see but—a nose! He seized hold of it—yes, his nose! “Yippee!” exclaimed Kovalev, and in his delight would have danced a Cossack *trepak* barefoot in the room had he not been put off by Ivan's entry. He at once called for his washing things, and on washing himself took another look in the mirror: there was the nose. Wiping himself with a towel he took yet another look: there it was, his nose!

“Ahem, Ivan, would you have a look, I think I have a pimple on my nose,” he said, thinking to himself: what if Ivan says: “Why no, sir, not only no pimple, but no nose either!”

But Ivan said: “No, no pimple, your nose is as clean as a whistle!”

“Jolly good show!” said the Major to himself and clicked his fingers. At this moment the barber Ivan Yakovlevich peeked round the door, but as timidly as a cat which has just been thrashed for stealing the bacon.

“Tell me first, are your hands clean?” shouted Kovalev while he was still some way off.

“They are.”

“Liar!”

“I swear they're clean, sir.”

“Well, they'd better be.”

Kovalev sat down. Ivan Yakovlevich swathed him in a towel and in a single instant, with the aid of a brush, transformed his entire beard and part of his cheeks into a mass

of whipped cream, such as is served at birthday parties in merchants' households. "Well I never!" exclaimed Ivan Yakovlevich to himself on seeing the nose, and then twisted his head round and looked at the nose from the side: "Look at that! Who would have thought it!" he continued, gazing at length at the nose. Finally with a movement as gentle and cautious as one could imagine he raised two fingers preparing to seize it by its tip. Such was Ivan Yakovlevich's system.

"Now, now, careful!" shouted Kovalev. At this Ivan Yakovlevich dropped his hands frightened and non-plussed as never before in his life. Finally he started scratching gingerly away with the razor beneath the major's chin, and although he did not find it at all easy or convenient to shave without holding onto his client's olfactory organ, he nevertheless managed, by somehow propping his rough thumb against the major's cheek and lower gum to overcome all the obstacles and accomplished the act of shaving him.

When the operation had been completed, Kovalev made haste to dress, called a cab and drove straight to the pastry shop. While still in the doorway he shouted: "Waiter, a cup of chocolate!" and the very same moment repaired to the mirror: there was the nose. He jauntily turned round and narrowing his eyes, cast a satirical glance at two officers, one of whom had a nose no bigger than a waistcoat button. After this he made for the office of the department in which he was negotiating for the post of vice-governor, or, failing that, an administratorship. On his way through the reception room he glanced into the mirror: the nose was in place. Then he went to call upon another collegiate assessor, a fellow major, and a great satirist, to whose snide remarks he would usually answer: "Now now, go easy on the sting!" On the way he thought: "If the major doesn't split his sides laughing on seeing me it will be a sure sign that everything is as it should be and in its proper place." But the collegiate assessor did not bat an eyelid. "Jolly good, damn it all!" thought Kovalev to himself. On the road he met Madame Podtochina with her daughter, bowed to them and was greeted with cries of delight: clearly his appearance had not been adversely affected. He spoke with them at great length, and made a point of bringing out his snuff-box, and with

great deliberation plugged his nose in both orifices, thinking all the while: "So much for you two, right pair of hens! And I shan't marry the daughter all the same. A spot of amour—by all means!" And from then onwards Major Kovalev went about his business as if nothing had ever happened, walking along Nevsky Prospect, visiting the theatre, showing his face everywhere. And his nose, also as if nothing had ever happened, remained fixed to his face, and gave no sign of having ever been unstuck at all. After this Major Kovalev was forever in good mood, smiling away, doggedly pursuing all the pretty ladies and even once stopping at a stall in the Gostiny Dvor to buy a ribbon for a medal, although it is not sure why as he was not himself a knight of any order.

And such a thing happened in the northern capital of our vast country! Only now, when we ponder over the entire story, do we see that it contains much that is highly implausible. Leaving aside the strange, unnatural detachment of the nose and its appearance in various places in the guise of a state councillor—how could Kovalev fail to see that it is not done to place advertisements concerning missing noses in the newspaper? By which I do not mean that I regard newspaper advertisements as a pointless extravagance—that is nonsense, and I am in no way a tightfisted person. But it is indecent, improper, incorrect! And then again: how did the nose turn up in a freshly-baked loaf, and how in the first place did Ivan Yakovlevich?.. No, I do not understand that, not a bit of it! But stranger still, and hadest of all to understand, is why authors should take such incidents as their subject-matter. I am forced to admit I find it quite incomprehensible. I just ... no, I simply do not understand. Firstly, there is absolutely no benefit to the nation; secondly... no, and there's no benefit secondly either. I simply do not know what it means...

But all the same, all things considered, we probably can concede this and that, and the odd thing here and there, and maybe even ... I mean, strange things happen all the time, do they not? And you must admit, when you think about it, there is something in all this, isn't there? Whatever you might say, such things do happen, rarely perhaps, but they do.

VLADIMIR SOLLOGUB

(1813–1882)

Vladimir Sollogub came from an aristocratic family belonging to the highest circle of St. Petersburg society.

In 1833, he graduated from Derpt University and entered government service, first in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and later in the Ministry for Internal Affairs. He began to write in his student days and his first works were published in 1837. In the mid-forties Sollogub according to Ivan Panayev, a famous journalist and writer, became "the best loved and most fashionable fiction writer". But after the stories "The Buggy" (1840), "The Chemist's Wife" (1841), and several others, which brought the author fame, his writings began to appear in print less and less frequently. His contemporaries claimed the reason for his rapid decline lay in the peculiarities of Sollogub's character. Ivan Panayev wrote: "He lacked the will to concentrate on one thing, to choose for himself a particular calling, a speciality. ...He wanted to*

* Panayev, I., *Literary Memoires*, Leningrad, 1950, p. 269.

*attain an important administrative post, enjoy the court's favour, play a role in high society, and gain literary repute, without expending any particular effort."***

There were also objective reasons interfering with the development of Sollogub's literary gifts. He lived a long life and thus was a contemporary of such great writers as Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. His literary talents were incomparably less. He could, to the best of his abilities, do no more than rework those themes which the great authors had mentioned in passing. His story "The Blizzard" is a perfect example of this: Pushkin's influence is felt even by the inexperienced reader. However, Sollogub's works are interesting for the modern reader in that the author had a thorough knowledge of the mores and customs of Russian aristocratic society, and possessed a rare feeling of moderation.

**** Ibid., p. 270.**

*THE BLIZZARD**

To Count P. V. Orlov-Denisov

Snow fell in thick flakes. A covered sleigh pulled by three exhausted horses moved slowly along the Saratov Highway. The white, snow-covered steppe stretched out on all sides, and a sharp wind blew across the open plain. It was cold, dismal and depressing.

A young officer of the Guard lay in the covered sleigh, wrapped up in a bearskin coat, brooding out of boredom. He was thinking of St. Petersburg, where he was hurrying to his brother's wedding, of that eternally agitated, restless St. Petersburg, which had devoured the best years of his life and had given him neither inner peace nor pleasant memories in return. He went over his youthful past in his mind: his amorous adventures, his desire to love, his disappointment at his blighted hopes. A line of slender girls and beautiful well-dressed young women passed before his eyes. All of them had thrown him inviting glances, polite smiles, and alluring words, but there was nothing surprising in this: he was from an old, honoured family, possessed a vast, lucrative estate, was young, wealthy, agile, handsome and danced with magnificent grace. He was highly respected. Mothers invited him to dinner, fathers called on him, and daughters shyly chose him for the mazurka. Everyone had their eye on him. Society beauties invited him to their boxes in the theater and to soirées in their drawing rooms, where many cigarettes were smoked and much nonsense was spoken. Some zealously tried to lure him into their nets, while others openly quarreled over him. What more could he want? Was not his lot an enviable one? Were not all his desires satisfied? Why then did an oppressive weight

lie on his heart? Because from that whirlwind of restlessness and conceit, he had not carried away one gratifying feeling which could warm his soul like an icon-lamp. Because he understood quite well that the looks of marriageable young women and the sighs of high-born beauties were not aimed at him, but at what he possessed. He discerned the strange peculiarities of society where passion was still attainable, but where there was not and could never be a refuge for deep, lasting love, free of calculation and not meant simply as a diversion. Love which was given to only a few, but which shone and warmed eternally, accompanying one to the grave.

Suddenly the sleigh came to a halt.

"What are you doing?" the officer shouted. "I have never seen anyone drive like you! You shall get not a kopeck's tip from me! "

The coachman climbed down from his seat, clapped his frozen hands, and bent down as if searching for something.

"A tip! " he muttered through his teeth. "Who's thinkin' of a tip? God be with us! Appears we've lost our way, sir."

"Are you blind?" the officer asked impatiently.

"Blind," the coachman muttered. "Blind. The gentleman ain't bein' fair. Blind I've never been, sir. Look at the weather! There's a blizzard ragin'."

"What difference does that make?"

"What difference! Look around you, sir. Heaven help us! What a blizzard! Oh, what can we do?"

The officer peeked out from the sleigh and was horrified at what he saw.

Those who have never traveled through the Russian steppe in the winter can not possibly conceive of a steppe blizzard. Initially the snow falls thick and fast and the wind blows it about gustily, finding nothing to bar its way. The earth, like an ice-bound sea, is covered with a crunchy, white tablecloth for as far as the eye can see and is sharply delineated from the black sky hanging low and ominous above it. No birds fly and no hares race by. Everything is deserted, dead, savage and full of terrible mystery. Only the voice of the imminent blizzard resounds freely over the flat, open spaces, crying, howling and roaring until it finally grows into a frightening chorus known only to the steppe. Suddenly nature shudders. The blizzard flies on the wings of

the snowstorm and something incomprehensible and inexpressible begins. Perhaps it is the earth which, in convulsions, explodes into the sky, or the sky, which crashes to the earth, but everything is suddenly thrown together, whirled about and merged into infernal chaos. Sheets of snow, like gigantic shrouds, rise, swaying and writhing with a frightening roar. They battle among themselves, fall, tumble, break apart and again rise, even larger and fiercer than before. There is no sign of a road. The blizzard is all around. This is its kingdom, its day of revelry and wild merry-making. Pity the man who falls into its clutches: it will torture him, whirling him about, burying him in snow and having a good laugh at his expense, and may not allow him to escape alive.

Needless to say, to come from St. Petersburg's perfumed, elegantly dressed, shimmering world and suddenly find oneself in the midst of such a fantastic celebration of the savage steppe winter, was too sudden a contrast. The officer grew thoughtful and began to gaze around anxiously. Visions of balls, beautiful women and dreams disappeared instantly. He realized that the situation was serious.

"Perhaps we should stop?" he said uncertainly.

"Stop," the coachman whispered. "' Course we can stop, but then we might be in even more trouble."

"Why is that?"

"Why, sir, we'll be covered up completely and they won't find us till spring. The cold will seep into our bones and we'll freeze."

"Then get moving!" the officer shouted. "Move!"

"Where'll I go, sir? Look at the storm. 'Tis pitch black."

The blizzard strengthened, and the travelers were in grave danger. The sleigh moved by guesswork among the snowdrifts and the horses got stuck in moving avalanches of snow and were barely able to move their legs. The coachman walked along beside them, muttering to himself. The officer was silent. They continued in this manner for almost two torturous hours, but the blizzard did not let up and the sleigh cut deeper into the growing drifts of snow. The officer felt that the cold was enveloping his extremities and his thoughts became confused. A quiet drowsiness, full of a peculiar, savage bliss, began to lure him into a

gentle sleep from which he would have never awoken.

Suddenly, a light flickered in the distance. The coachman took off his hat and crossed himself.

"We're in luck, sir. It seems there is a house nearby, otherwise we might 'ave left our bones here."

Feeling salvation near, the horses raised their heads, and strained and pulled with renewed energy. The travelers moved in the direction of the saving light, with no thought of searching for a road. Soon they drove up to a small hut, which leaned to one side and looked as if it had been abandoned by a tribe of nomads. A small, rotting shed with a tumbledown roof adjoined the poor house from which a light shone through two small windows.

"A way-station," the coachman said, tossing the reins to one side.

The stationmaster ran out on the porch. He helped the officer out of the sleigh, led him into the building, and looked over his travel-papers, hurriedly buttoning his frock-coat all the way to the neck. A thick steam hung in the small, stuffy room. A samovar glittered through the mist, and the officer could make out the dark figures and red faces of three merchants, apparently also caught by the storm.

The elder of the three greeted the new arrival.

"Our numbers have increased. You must be cold, sir. We humbly ask Your Honour to join us, if you don't disdain the company of merchants. We can offer Your Honour tea."

The officer gladly accepted the cordial invitation and joined his new acquaintances.

As expected, the conversation revolved around the weather, with a discussion of blizzards in general and this one in particular, and around the fish trade.

The officer took part in the conversation as he was able, but soon grew bored and began to examine the room. An enormous Russian stove with a sleeping platform towered to the left of the door, and a double-bed with a feather mattress and pillows covered with a well-used patchwork quilt stood next to it. A couch, on which the merchants sat, was located between the windows and there was a second bed on the opposite side of the room. Actually, it would be hard to call it a bed since it consisted of nothing more

than three planks covered with thick felt. A chair stood next to it and a huge chest and a cockoo clock with an indefatigable pendulum completed the decor in the stationmaster's living quarters. Postal Department instructions were pasted on the wooden walls and various insects, well-known to Russians, scurried about daringly, wagging their feelers. The blizzard continued to howl outside the windows. Suddenly there was a scraping noise on the porch, and a child's exclamation and adult voices could be heard. The stationmaster again bustled about. The door flung open, and a retired army captain with his wife, elderly sister and small daughter burst into the room. The captain first exchanged greetings with the officer.

"What terrible weather! Were you traveling as well?"

"As you see."

"Coming from far away?"

"Yes."

"Where, if I may be so bold to inquire?"

"I am on my way to St. Petersburg."

"Oh! " the captain's wife squealed.

"Allow me to ask your rank and name?" the captain continued.

The officer gave his name.

"How is it that you have favoured us with your presence? In the line of duty, I assume. And you, my good men, must be in trade," the captain addressed the merchants in a less polite tone. "Coming back from the fair with your pockets filled? Cheated our brother, the noble, no doubt." Pleased with his witty remark, the captain laughed heartily.

"We are coming from my mother-in-law's in the country. Do you know her? The local landowner Prokhisneva. A kind old woman. Sixty serfs she has. Imagine, only this morning my wife said to me: '*Basile*, let's not go, the weather is terrible.' But I'm an old military man and answered: 'To hell with the weather, Mother! The order is to march, so we shall march!' Who listens to women, anyway. I'll damned if I will."

"Oh, *Basile*! " his wife interrupted in an affected manner. "Such language! How many times has our aunt, Princess Shelopayeva, told you to watch your tongue. Who will people take us for, especially when we are traveling and

dressed in such a fashion. As luck would have it, I did not wear my velvet cloak. Mother told me to put it on, but I forgot. Oh, by the way, *ma soeur*," she continued, turning to the frowning, forty-year old woman with them, who was obviously an old maid and full of bitterness from years of thwarted hopes. "Did I tell you *Eudoxie* wrote to me from St. Petersburg that she is sending me a checked mantle and a rose-coloured hat with a plume. Yes, *ma chère*, she keeps inviting us to St. Petersburg and is annoyed that we keep promising and yet do not come. They are pining for us and our aunt, Princess Shelopayeva, keeps asking about us." The captain's wife turned to officer. "You must know my aunt, Princess Shelopayeva?"

"No, we are not acquainted."

"How can that be? Everyone of nobility visits her. Her house is always open and the cream of society gathers there. You have heard of her, no doubt?"

"Perhaps."

"I am sure you have. She is very well-known in the capital."

"I wan' porridge! I wan' porridge! " the little girl began to whine.

"Stop that whining this instant! " the captain roared. "Stop, or I'll thraddle you. That's right, I shall and you'll be ashamed before all these people."

"I wan' porridge! " the little girl squealed.

"Stop! " the captain shouted.

"Porridge! " the little girl screamed.

The women hurried to calm her down, taking the opportunity to tidy themselves up by fixing crushed caps and re-pinning shawls.

The captain sat down next to the officer and literally enveloped him with words.

"I could have made a fine career for myself, but fate had something else in store for me. As you can see, I am now married and have a family. We have a small estate and I can't complain, thank the Lord. We don't live like you do in St. Petersburg, of course, but as befits a retired field officer. Our neighbors are fine people and our assessor is a well-read man. I can't complain, thank the Lord. I am content. But you know, you meet a person like you and

you begin to wonder. Against your will you think: 'Vassily, Vassily, you made a mistake! You could have been colonel by now and had an order.' I was unlucky. God only knows what made me decide to retire. There was one rather awkward incident. I was serving in a rifle regiment then. The commander was a good man, he now commands a brigade. I had many excellent friends. You'd have thought I would have never left. But imagine, one day..." Suddenly the captain stopped and listened.

"Someone else has come," he said.

And in truth, they could hear horses snorting and the squeal of sleigh runners outside. The stationmaster again hurried to the door. Several voices sounded at once on the porch, two sleighs stood in front of the hut.

The officer, bored with the captain's tale, started for the door but suddenly froze in his tracks, thunderstruck by the group walking toward him. A very old, aristocratic lady, looking as if there were very little life left in her, hobbled into the room. Her head shook, her eyes were sunken and her face was completely covered with wrinkles. She walked, or rather, moved her legs, completely hunched over, groaning and whispering a prayer, supported on one side by a man in a belted sheepskin coat and on the other by a young woman.

The officer was dumbfounded.

He had never since the time he had first begun to admire the fair sex, come across such a face. It did not shine with that striking, insolent beauty one notices immediately and which commands attention and surprise. At first glance, it was simply very pleasant to look at, but the longer one gazed, the more attractive and comely it became. The woman's features were surprisingly delicate and regular. Her head was small, her skin pale, her hair black, and her eyes—her eyes defied description. Large and dark with long lashes and sharply defined eyebrows. They would have driven a painter mad. Narrators have yet to do justice to women's eyes, though much nonsense had been written in their honour, and they have been compared to stars, diamonds and God knows what. An inspired brush or even a dull, thick pen can somehow manage to represent their colour and shape, but how does one express their

mysterious fire? How does one capture the fleeting mockery, stormy indignation, ardent flames of passion or the depths of sacred feeling of love which shines in them? There is neither paint nor words to describe this, and there should not be.

She was dressed simply, but elegantly, and her clothes reflected wealth and good taste. After carefully helping the old woman to sit down, she took off her coat and hat. Her lithe figure was revealed and her beautiful, black braid fell sumptuously to her feet. She blushed slightly as she re-wound the braid around her head.

The officer admired her in silence. All the woman's features were somehow aristocratically refined. She removed a glove to reveal an exquisite hand of, and this is not meant as a reproach to our ladies of the steppe, a rare whiteness that attested to much care and attention. She ran the hand over her hair, and in that simple, ordinary, womanly gesture there was such natural grace and casualness that all the beautiful women who have developed that gesture to a fine art, would have grown pale with envy and despair. The officer could not believe his eyes. "How could such a pure diamond appear in this remote, God-forsaken place?" he thought. "Who is she and where is she from?" Not fully realizing how it came about, he found himself at her side and began to wait upon her.

There was no standing on ceremony. At times of disaster people grow close and become friends. Before half an hour was up, they felt as if they had known each other for years. He carried the women's things from the sleighs, served the old woman tea, seated her more comfortably and put a pillow under her feet. The captain paid compliments, the old maid smiled sourly and meaningfully, Princess Shelopayeva's niece entered into conversation with the newest arrivals, and the merchants offered them their places on the couch.

Outside the blizzard raged, tearing at the shutters and racing wildly across the open expanse of the steppes, but the officer was no longer thinking about it. He had some provisions with him and offered to share them with his stranded companions. The captain supplied a frozen turkey and a thrown-together supper was organized. They sat

round the table, and a general, rather superficial, conversation got underway. The captain's wife told them how everyone at Princess Shelopayeva's would laugh when they learned that she, a person used to the finer things since childhood, had spent several hours in a peasant's hut. At those words the officer glanced at his beautiful neighbor: a slight, barely visible smile flashed across her face. They understood one another.

"Have you been to St. Petersburg?" he asked her.

"No."

"And you do not plan to come?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I am married."

The officer lowered his head. "How can she be married?" He felt uncomfortable and annoyed.

"Why is your husband not with you?" he continued.

"He stayed in the country. He does not like to travel."

"How can you be travelling without him?"

"He allowed me to go with Grandmother to Voronezh on pilgrimage."

"A fine chaperone," the officer thought to himself, glancing at the old woman who was chewing inanely.

"Do you live in the country the year round?" he asked

"Yes."

"You never leave?"

"Never."

"Pardon me for saying so, but it must be terribly boring there."

She sighed.

"One gets used to it."

"How do you pass the time?"

"As one usually does in the country."

"But what do you do?"

"Practically nothing. I manage the house, embroider, read."

"Do you have children?"

"No."

For some reason, the officer was secretly pleased.

"What do you read?"

"Whatever I come upon. French books, Russian journals..."

The officer frowned.

"You society people do not understand the comfort one can find in reading," she continued, smiling. "Books are companions. They are true and loyal friends. Try living in the country as I do and then you will understand their importance. Without them I think I might go mad. As you know, the evenings are long. Our home is in the steppe. We have no neighbors, and if someone does drop by occasionally, it would be better if they had not come at all."

"Is your husband a hunter?"

"Yes, he loves to hunt. One must have some kind of interest in the country."

"Is your husband a young man, if I may be so bold as to inquire?"

"No," she laughed. "But why are we talking about him? Tell me how you came to be here."

"On business."

"Will you be here long?"

"No. Actually, I am traveling to my brother's wedding."

"Are you to be his best man?"

"Yes. I am in a great hurry. That is, I was in a great hurry."

"And now you are not?"

"Now I have met you," he said looking at her tenderly.

"Grandmother, I think the blizzard has let up and we can continue our journey," the young woman said.

The old woman did not hear her, but the others assured her that there could be no thought of travelling until morning and that it was time to think about sleeping arrangements. It was midnight, and everyone was drowsy. The travelers looked with longing at the bed, but as usually occurs in such moments, the voice of fairness won out. The general consensus was to grant the bed to the weakest members of the group, meaning the old woman and the little girl who, having cried most of the evening, was now sleeping in a corner. No sooner said than done. The old woman was put to bed where she moaned, muttered in whispers, crossed herself several times and finally fell asleep. The merchants made themselves comfortable on the couch and the stove ledge and soon announced in noisy snores that they had passed over into that invisible world of

dreams. The captain settled down on the chest, while his wife, sister, and the dark-eyed beauty lay width-wise across the plank bed, with pillows placed at their heads and a bench to support their feet. The captain's wife and the young woman lay on either side, with the old maid between them. The officer was left the chair which, as good fortune would have it, stood on the better side of the bed. He sat down. Everything had happened naturally, as if a result of some unspoken agreement. Silence fell, interrupted only by the click of the pendulum, the regular breathing of those sleeping, and the howl of the blizzard. The strange encampment was lit by one tallow candle, from which the intrepid captain resolutely peeled off the burnt end of the wick with his fingers from time to time. He soon tired of that occupation, curled up like a pretzel, and like the merchants, drifted off into a deep, noisy sleep. A dark, reddish glow filled the room. Everyone slept except the officer and the beautiful woman next to him who were talking in whispers, and the old maid, who listened to their conversation with bilious curiosity.

"I must apologize to you," he said. "I spoke foolishly. You are angry with me."

"No, I am not angry. It is simply that I am not a woman of society and am not accustomed to such compliments. Perhaps that is amusing, but on the other hand I don't think it's so terrible that we are unable to play games with words and always say exactly what we feel."

"I too say what I feel."

"Please stop. What purpose does this serve? We met accidentally and will part soon, never to see each other again. I know, you laugh at provincial women as did Pushkin. The truth is, there is much in us that is amusing, but perhaps there is much that is sad as well." She continued as if talking to herself: "Think for a moment about the fate of a young woman who knows the good things in life only through books. Her husband is often hunting. Perhaps he is a good man, but nevertheless, she is dissatisfied. It is boring in the country, and not only boring, but vexing, in a way. She is completely cut off from everything. Everyone pities the prisoner in a dungeon, but no one pities the woman sentenced from childhood to eternal exile

and permanent seclusion. Is it gay in St. Petersburg?"

"Gay," the officer said, sighing. "Too gay. I am a man of society, but strange as it may seem, we both have reached the same point. That is, we both are experiencing excruciating boredom, I from overindulgence and you from deprivation. You complain that in your lonely exile there is no possibility for you to develop your heart and soul, while we of society, endlessly searching for the unattainable, feel that our hearts and souls are repressed. You know the loneliness of seclusion, but thank God you do not yet know the loneliness of society life. You know that one must love, while we know that there is no one to love. Hope and strength churn in you, while we are crushed by impotence and infirmity."

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked, barely audibly.

"Of course! Passionately. But nothing came of it. In society, to love means to agree to certain deception. What do you think love is?"

"I... I think... nothing."

"Love is the soul of the universe, but that soul is cramped in society, and do you now why? Because vanity is hiding behind it. I thought that I was loved, but I was mistaken. They did not love me but a dashing cavalier at a ball, a high society dandy, and I did not know how to get the better of my competitors."

"You had competitors?" she asked. "Who could they have been?"

"They were many. An evening dress, trivial annoyances, foolish gossip, enviable invitations, masquerade costumes and thousands of details which make up the essence of society woman."

"So you do not believe in love?"

"Heaven forbid! One must believe in love. I am simply saying there is no one to love. In order to love one needs certain conditions, fortuitous circumstances, spiritual freshness and purity. Thank God I feel that I can still love, but not a lady of high society. I have been hurt too often. I could love a pure soul passionately and eternally. A simple, trusting woman who was willing to share her life with me on the strength of feelings alone, without fear or calculation. If you, for example..."

"I want a drink," the old woman groaned from the

bed, waking up the little girl, who began to cry. The officer leaped to his feet. He brought the old woman a glass of water and calmed the little girl by thrusting a sugar cube in her mouth. He returned to his chair, but it was impossible to renew their conversation. The young woman had closed her eyes, and one arm lay gracefully against the back of the bed. She was either thinking about something or falling asleep.

"Are you tired?" the officer asked quietly.

"Yes."

He fell silent, but his heart was beating wildly. That woman was so wonderfully beautiful, illuminated by the reddish glow of the candle burning low. The soft paleness gave her such charm, her features were so perfect, so delicate, and there was such deep, submissive suffering in each of her words. She was so natural, so simple and so straightforward that he had the urge to throw himself at her feet, pour out his heart and devote his life to her. The small, pale hand temptingly drew his attention. The officer looked around. Everyone was sleeping quietly, only the blizzard raged outside. Even the old maid had fallen asleep, tired of listening to them. The officer looked at the white hand. An invisible force pulled him toward it. His blood race. He felt he was in love deeper than he had ever been in his life, and contradictory emotions stirred in him; fear, desire, love. Finally he could no longer contain himself and glancing around once more, he quietly pressed his lips to the hand.

The old maid started in her sleep from the hated sound.

The young woman did not stir, and the officer sat as if condemned to death.

Several minutes of oppressive silence passed.

Then, quietly and gently, as if in her sleep, the young woman lifted her hand and placed it under her head, like a sleeping child. Obviously, she slept. Suddenly she opened her eyes.

"Are you married?" she asked quietly.

"I..."

"Oh, yes. You said you were to be the best man at your brother's wedding, therefore you must be a bachelor. When you do marry, love your wife," she continued, in a

voice full of quiet sadness.

"What do you mean by that?"

"God only knows what thoughts can come to one. Love your wife."

"Can one truly make that kind of promise? What if I were married and suddenly met you..."

"What difference would that make?"

"Then I could no longer love my wife, and would love you, because no matter what... I can not keep it locked in my heart. You will think me stupid, ridiculous and impertinent, but I love you madly."

His eyes shone and his voice shook. He spoke what he truly felt. She looked at him with a gentle reproach, and shook her head.

"Are you not ashamed?" she said quietly and covered her eyes with her hands.

"No!" he said, becoming more and more inflamed. "I am not ashamed, I am happy. I have told what I feel. You yourself realize that I am telling the truth. I understand you. Do not blame fate. Know that there was a man who loved you with his whole being, without schemes or intentions. There can be none. We shall soon part, and though our acquaintance lasted but a minute, a minute can be a wonderful thing. I love you in a way that I never thought I could love anyone. Perhaps that feeling will be gone tomorrow, but at this moment, I love you deeply. For me, you personify the best dreams of my youth. I had always hoped to meet a woman like you. Fate has not meant us to be together, but we shall remember that when we met by chance, we understood one another, and held one another in high esteem. At least we shall have warm, sincere memories, you in your dull country estate, and me in my boring society life."

He continued to speak ardently, like a young man in love, and she, fixing her dark eyes on him, listened enraptured, as if hearing something long awaited and hoped for. Gradually, she found words for feelings, too, but what passed between them will remain a secret. It would sound lifeless and trite on paper. Such conversations are wonderful in that they are meant for two.

The next few hours passed in an instant. The young

woman abandoned herself to a feeling of radiant delight and opened the bountiful treasure chest of her locked heart. She had never been so beautiful as she was then. He unconsciously took her hand, and she did not think to pull it away. The hut was paradise to them.

Suddenly the candle hissed and went out, and a pale beam of light streamed in from the window.

"It is getting light," she said. "We shall soon part! Give me something to remember you by."

He quickly pulled a sheet of paper from his wallet, picked up a pencil and grew thoughtful.

"I am not a writer," he said. "Another would write you a poem."

"Write anything."

"The night of January 12th-13th, 1849," he wrote, paused, and added resolutely: "The best night in my life." Then he removed the ring from his finger and handed her the paper and the ring. She hid them quickly.

"I can not give you a ring," she said frowning. "I have only one, and it is my wedding ring, but I shall send you an icon from Voronezh. It will bring you happiness and remind you of our brief meeting and of the woman who shall remember and love you forever. You are the one person who understood her. I am certain you shall become involved with others and shall forget me, but I shall remember you always. I shall pray for you." She squeezed his hand firmly.

At that moment the stationmaster entered the room.

"The storm has let up," he said, rubbing his hands together.

Suddenly, everyone began to stir. The old woman groaned, the little girl cried, and the merchants went out to their sleighs. The horses were led from the shed, and the samovar was brought in. Within an hour the travelers were ready to leave. The officer helped the old woman into her sleigh and kissed her granddaughter's hand. Tears shone in her eyes.

"Farewell," the young woman said sadly. "Forever."

In a quarter of an hour the troika overtook the women's two sleighs. The officer bowed. He felt very depressed. A pale face appeared at the window, dark eyes

flashed and a white handkerchief fluttered. The coachman, feeling more cheerful, flourished his whip, and the swift troika raced ahead even faster. The officer turned and watched the two sleighs grow smaller and smaller until they disappeared from view. He sighed sorrowfully and pulled his coat about him. The snow crunched under the runners and the coachman urged the horses on. The snowy plain stretched out on all sides, but a distinct line appeared between the steppe and the sky. The wind had quieted and a cold, metallic sun burned a hole in the grey, misty heavens.

The blizzard was over.

Translated by Tracy Kuehn

ALEXANDER HERZEN

(1812–1870)

Alexander Herzen, revolutionary democrat, writer, philosopher, journalist, was one of the biggest personalities in 19th century Russian culture.

The uprising of the revolutionary "Decembrists" in 1825, and the consequent execution of the leaders, "awakened his childishly slumbering soul". Three years later, Herzen and his closest friend poet Nikolai Ogarev pledged an oath to dedicate their lives to the struggle against oppression and enslavement. And they were true to their word.

All his life, and even after his death, Herzen was persecuted by the Russian government for his political convictions. In 1834, he was sentenced to his first exile in Perm. In the 1840's his name became known to all reading Russia after the publication of his novel "Who Is to Blame?" (1841-46), the short novels "Doctor Krupov" (1847) and "The Thieving Magpie" (1848), his philosophical works "Dilettantism in Science" (1842-43) and "Letters About the Study of Nature" (1844-45), and his articles which ruthlessly exposed the existing system and proved that it was impossible for an individual to develop harmoniously in that stifling atmosphere. In 1847 Herzen was compelled to leave Russia for ever, and carry on with the cause of his country's liberation abroad.

He warmly welcomed the revolution of 1848 in France. He was closely connected with many progressive men of his epoch: Robert Owen, Victor Hugo, Adam Mickiewicz, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Louis Blanc, Lajos Kossuth, and others. In 1853 Herzen set up a "Free Russian Printing House" in London, where began to print the Polar Star almanac with the silhouettes on the cover of the Decembrists hanged by Nicholas I. Next, he became the editor of "Kolokol," a newspaper in which the arbitrariness and lawlessness practised in Russia were exposed. Even the highest officials went in fear of Herzen's publications, and as for reading the newspaper, which was circulated illegally, the penalty was imprisonment or exile.

Herzen, a brilliant writer, is the author of one of the best autobiographies in world literature—"The Past and Thoughts" (1852-1868). Maxim Gorky wrote: "The power of his intellect is as extraordinary as the beauty and brilliance of his language." By developing the realistic traditions of Pushkin and Gogol, Herzen prepared the way for the emergence of revolutionary-democratic novels. He initiated the populist movement "Narodnaya Volya" and created the theory of "Russian socialism". Lenin's article "In Memoriam" speaks of the role played by Herzen in the Russian emancipation movement.

THE THIEVING MAGPIE*

A Story

Dedicated

to

*Mikhail Semenovich Shchepkin.***

*Your house stands richly decorated,
Open to fellow-countrymen.
There, too, Terpsichore is fêted,
Eros and Thalia, his friend,
And there the master makes them welcome
And beams on all with kindly look.*

Ukrainian Messenger for 1816

"Have you noticed," said the young man with the close-cropped hair, continuing our conversation about the theatre.— "Have you noticed that not often, it's true, but nevertheless it does happen that in this country we do have good actors, whereas there are practically no good actresses, and even the great name of Semyonova has receded into legend; there must be a reason for that."

"The reason's not far to seek; you only fail to understand it," argued the other man with the pudding-basin hair-cut, "because you look at everything through Western spectacles. No Slav woman will ever grow accustomed to stepping out onto a stage and exposing herself to the eyes of the public, to provoking those feelings which are, for her, a gift reserved exclusively for her husband; her place is in the home, not in the pillory. Unmarried—she is a daughter, a submissive daughter with no will of her own; married—she is a submissive wife. That is the natural position for a woman in the family and, even if it deprives us of good actresses, at least it is an excellent way of safeguarding our moral purity."

"Then why is it that the Germans," remarked a third man with unkempt long hair, "have, I believe, just as stable a family life as we do, and yet this in no way prevents them producing good actresses? And then I disagree with you on principle: I don't know what the Western Slavs do in the

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1985

** Shchepkin, Mikhail Semenovich (1788–1863)—one of the greatest of Russian actors.—*Ed.*

privacy of their homes, but we Russians, I assure you, are fast ceasing to be such patriarchs as you make us out to be."

"And may I ask where you observed and studied the Slav family? Amongst the upper classes who live a life apart? Amongst the towns folk who have abandoned the rural customs which alone go to make up our traditional, popular way of life? Or on the main roads where the peasant has become a trader, where the industry you've introduced has spoilt him with plenty and has taught him artificial requirements? It's not there that the family has been preserved; if you want to see *that*, you must go to the quiet villages that lie off the main road."

"Well, it's a strange thing, I must say, that roads and towns and everything else that spells prosperity and progress for other people should be considered harmful for Slavs, as you choose to depict them; according to you, in order to preserve the purity of our customs, there should be no communications, transport, trade, or even economic well-being, which is the primary condition of progress. Of course, Robinson Crusoe, too, when he was living all alone on his island, was a man of irreproachable behaviour, never played cards, never frequented taverns."

"You can make anything sound ridiculous; a joke may raise a laugh but it's no way to refute an argument. There are things that—for all the agility of your Western mind—you'll never understand, no more than a man with no ear will ever understand music, which in no way hinders him from being a good painter, or anything else you like to think of. It's simply not given to you to understand that poverty, humble and industrious, is actually *above* self-satisfied wealth. You'll never understand our patriarchal family life, neither in the peasant's house, where the father is head of the family, nor in the village, where the head of the community is—a father. You are used to strictly delineated rights, to frames for people and for classes, to mutual control and mistrust, all that is essential in the West: there everything is based on mutual hostility, there all the problem the State has to resolve is, in the words of your own poet, to hold a skilful balance in the struggle:

*A fiery onslaught here, and there a dour resistance,
Are the bold springs or a new civic conscience...*

"I somehow don't think this is the way on which we're likely to find out why we have so few actresses," said the man who had first introduced the subject. "If, in order to do full justice to our theme, you want to take in all the historic and political questions *chemin faisant*, then you'll have to devote about forty years of your life to it, and even so the outcome will be doubtful. You, my dear Slav, appear to be trying to say that we have no actresses because woman exists not as an individual in her own right, but as a member of the family in which she is entirely absorbed: there is a good deal of truth in what you say. Yet you maintain that the family is only to be found in little villages: but actresses don't come from out-of-the-way little villages! "

"Allow me to answer you on that," said the European (so we will call the long-haired fellow). "In general, whether along the main road or down the country lane, our women have not attained the same licence to take part in all aspects of life that they have in France for instance; there are exceptions, but always inseparable from an element of bravado—the most convincing proof that they are exceptions. Any woman in our society who took it into her head to behave as an equal with an educated man would not so much be freely exercising her rights as demonstrating her emancipation."

"Of course such a woman would be a monstrous exception. And a good thing too," retorted the Slav. "It's not here that you should look for *femme émancipée*; indeed I'm not at all sure whether one should look for her anywhere at all. As far as human rights are concerned, then I would like to draw your attention to the fact that here, from the very earliest times, woman enjoyed more clearly defined rights than in Europe: her estate is not joined to that of her husband, she has a voice in elections and the right to possess serfs."

"Undeniably, the ladies here do have certain rights unknown to the European woman—but forgive me, we are not speaking of written rights, but of unwritten rights, of public opinion. What would we ourselves say if one of the

ladies we know suddenly appeared in the middle of our very quiet and intrinsically inoffensive conversation? I am quite sure that both she and we would feel awkward: we prepare to take a quite different tone if we think we are going to be in the company of ladies; and that shows a lack of respect for women in general."

"You've been reading too much Georges Sand. Men shouldn't be too free and easy with women, and why should women want to share our talks? I'm tremendously fond of making company, undisturbed by females—there's something austere about it, not soft in any way."

"And extremely humane towards the women who are left abandoned at home. I do believe you'd have joined Zaporozhye Cossacks* if you'd been born just a little earlier."

"Your thought is so foreign that you haven't found a single Russian word to express it. As if women haven't enough to do in the modest circle of domestic life, and I am not even speaking of those who are mothers, whose duties are so sacred and complex."

"Oh, that modest circle! The Emperor Augustus, who shared your Slav theories, kept his daughter at home and if anyone asked where she was would reply with a smile: "Sitting at home, spinning wool." Well, you know, no one would say that *her* morals remained all that pure. It's my belief that if a woman is not admitted to half our interests, hobbies and pleasures then she is only half-educated and you can curse me in Czech if you like, but she'll also be only half-moral as well: firm morality is inseparable from intellectual awareness."

"Now it's my turn to refute you," said the instigator of the conversation. "Everyone here has seen with his own eyes that in educated circles in our society women are incomparably superior to their husbands: just try making such sweeping generalisations about life after that. It's really quite simple, though. Our men are not just men, they are soldiers or civil servants: from twenty years of

* Zaporozhye Sech—a socio-political and military organisation of Ukranian Cossacks (16th-18th centuries), was prominent in the struggle against the feudal order and national and religious persecution.—*Ed.*

age they are no longer their own masters, they are busy: soldiers with their training, civil servants with reports and synopses, and in the meantime their wives, unless totally absorbed in jam-making and pickling, are reading French novels."

"And much good may it do them! It must be an excellent education which they glean from Balzac, Sue, Dumas, from the senile chatter of men who have begun to moralise because they have no strength left for anything else."

"I'm ready to agree with you there, although I did not say that the ladies read the particular novels you just mentioned; and the surprising thing in all this is that the most empty-headed French novels have a more enlightening effect on our women than the most important occupations appear to have on their husbands, and all this is due at least in part to the fact that fate has made the French that way: whatever else a Frenchman may be, he is always didactic. He writes a cheap novel about unnatural passions with virtuous vices and vicious virtues and, on the way, or rather precisely because it's right out of the way, he touches on such lofty questions that you catch your breath and feel terrified, and then, in order to get rid of the terror you begin to think. Let us assume that you won't find the answer to all the questions, but the simple fact of having had your ideas stirred up is a kind of education. It's seeing this kind of relationship between the female education and the male that makes me surprised that we have no actresses."

"What more explanation do you want?" the Slav retorted with irritation. "We have no actresses for the simple reason it is an occupation incompatible with the virtuous modesty of the Slav woman. She prefers to be silent."

"You should have said that long ago," retorted the European. "You have explained more than you wished. Now it's quite clear why we don't have any actresses, but we do have an abundance of dancers. Joking apart, though. I think are we not without actresses because they are made to show passions they never knew existed and not in the least because there is a dearth of talent? Every emotion an actor has to show must be one he himself knows well if he is to convey it without caricature. It's no trouble

at all to act the Chinese in *Opium and Champagne*,* but do you think it really possible that I should give a convincing performance as an Indian Brahmin reduced to the depths of despair by having inadvertently touched a Pariah, or a XVII century boyar who is so jealous of his place at the council table that, in a fit of aristocratic pride, he actually rolls about underneath it, as a *point d'honneur*, and has to be dragged out by the legs? If our women really did not exist as individuals but were totally engrossed by the family there would be no reason to so much as think about the possibility of a great actress. In the pastoral life, as everywhere else, there may well be passions, but not the kind that are possible in drama: blind obedience, insidious secretiveness and double thinking are just as unsuited to true drama as base murder, as sensuality. The uneducated family is not a sufficiently developed unit—it's a *family*, whereas drama requires individual personalities. Happily, such families only exist in legend and in the dreams of the Slavs. But even if we have stepped beyond the barrier of patriarchal custom, yet surely we haven't become so many-sided that we can truly and deeply feel for the lived and suffered experience of others. Well, I ask you, how is a Russian actress to tackle the Maid of Orleans? It's not in her employ; or how is a Russian actor to recreate those magnificent, dour, proud and original characters of Shakespeare who surround his Johns, his Richards and his Henrys, all absolutely English people? They are just so strange to him as a man who smelt with his eyes and sung songs through his ears would be. Falstaff he might manage better, because Falstaff has some features which may be seen in any home, in any provincial town..."

"But surely some passions are common to all mankind?"

"Yes and no. Othello was jealous in an African way and strangled the innocent Desdemona, then cut his own throat, calling himself "Dog". But I had an acquaintance, whose estate marched with mine, who was also extremely jealous; once it happened that he intercepted a letter addressed to his wife and leaving no room for doubt as to her relationship with the author: in a fit of fury he had all the girl-

* A French vaudeville. *Ed.*

serfs flogged, sent the footman for a soldier and—made his peace with his wife. Jealousy is one and the same passion, but does it follow the same pattern in the Moor's rage and my good acquaintance's attempts to teach his dependants true morality? To some extent one can force oneself to understand an alien situation, an alien passion, but that is not enough for true art. Believe me, the more true a poet is to himself, the more sincere in all he writes, the more powerfully he will touch your heart, the more truly lyrical heights he will attain—and so it is with the actor: the character for whom he has no fellow-feeling he will either fail to express, or will express coldly, thanks only to his formal training; don't forget that, after all, he introduces something of himself into the character created by the author."

"What are you holding forth about so ardently?" asked a well-known actor, coming into the room on these words.

"Now that couldn't be better timed; you decide the question we're discussing. We unanimously elect you an infallible judge."

"I'm honoured. And what is the matter of your argument?"

"First, tell us if you've ever seen a Russian actress who wholly satisfied all your aesthetic requirements?"

"One who was no worse than Mars, Rachel?"

"Or Allan and Plessis at least."

"I have," replied the actor. "I have seen a great Russian actress. Only I would not risk a comparison. All the actresses you've just named are fine, great, each in her own way, but how their art compares to the one I've just mentioned I don't know. I only know that I have seen a great actress and that she was Russian! "

"In Moscow or in Petersburg?"

"That is a nice problem for our Slav, don't you think?" interrupted one of the speakers. "After all, the theatre belongs more to the St. Petersburg period of our history, than to the Muscovite. Well, where was she?"

"It must have been Moscow, whatever you may say," the Slav objected firmly.

"Calm yourselves. It was in neither city I saw her, but in a little provincial town."

"You're just saying that to be original, surely. You want to impress us with an effective statement."

"Maybe. You voted me an infallible judge—it's for you to believe what I tell you. How can I prove to you that twenty years ago I saw a great actress, that I wept over *La Pie Voleuse*, and that all this happened in a small town?"

"Very easily. Tell us some details about her; she can't have fallen from heaven straight into *The Thieving Magpie*, and presumably she didn't take flight after the performance together with that immoral bird."

"All right, then—only those memories are not happy ones for me, very painful, somehow. Still if you wish, I'll tell you all I remember. Give me a cigar."

"Here are *casadores cubrey* for you," said the European, extracting from his case a long, slender cigar the outer form of which clearly demonstrated its appurtenance to the highest aristocracy of tobacco leaf.

"You know the common human failing—whatever one's remembering, one always begins by recalling oneself; and so I, sinner that I am, will ask your permission to begin with myself."

"Yes, indeed. Most gladly."

"I don't know whether the details about the actress will be interesting or not, but I'm sure the bit about you will be:

*Parles-nous de vous, notre grand père,
Parlez-nous de vous! —"*

hummed the European.

They all fell silent, all moved a little closer, as people usually do when preparing to listen to a story. Here I will give, as far as I am able, the story the actor told. Of course it loses much in being written down, both because it is difficult to convey the animation with which he spoke and because I have not included everything, not wishing to overload my tale. But here is his story.

"You know that I began my career as an actor in a modest provincial theatre. The affairs of our theatre were not going well; I was already married, I had to think about the future. And it was at just this time that more and more legends were springing up about the theatre of Prince

Skalinsky in a distant town. Curiosity to see a well-organised theatre—hopes, and, perhaps, even ambition exercised a strong pull and drew me thither; there was nothing to hold me back, so I suggested to one of my friends who had had no intention of going that way, that we should make the journey to N. together, and we arrived within the week. The prince was extremely rich and spent all he had on the theatre. From which you can conclude that it was really not bad at all. The prince was a typically Russian character of broad sympathies and uncontrolled enthusiasm: a devoted art-lover, a man of immense taste, with a gift for luxury and at the same time, as is so often the case, quite unaccustomed to denying himself anything and a tremendous spendthrift. For the last we must not blame him. It is in all our blood. I, a modest actor, and he, a wealthy aristocrat, and the poor manual worker who drinks everything he earns, we all have much the same basic idea about economy; the only difference is in the amount we spend."

"We're not penny-pinching Germans," the Slav observed with satisfaction.

"There's no denying that," added the European. "Has any of us ever given himself pause for thought about whether or not he has enough money when he wants to drink good wine? Pushkin has said it for us:

*Do you remember, friends, how often
My last poor mite I spent with you?*

Quite the contrary: the less money we have, the more we spend. You probably haven't forgotten one of our friends who, having returned a glass of indifferent champagne which had been poured for him, remarked that we are not yet so rich as to drink bad wine."

"Gentlemen, we're interrupting the story. And so?"

"It doesn't matter. The prince had heard of me before. When I came to see him he was in his office distributing tickets and giving profound thought to whether the candidate for the ticket was worthy or not and, if worthy, of what precise place. 'Delighted, delighted that it has at last occurred to you to visit our theatre. You will be a welcome guest'— and a mass of compliments; all that was

left for me was to make my bow and thank him. The prince spoke about the theatre as one who has a thorough knowledge of the stage and of the secrets of production. We separated, I seem to recall, well pleased with one another. That same evening I went to the theatre; I don't remember what they were playing but I assure you that you yourselves can seldom have seen such opulence; what decorations, what costumes, what attention to detail! In a word, all the outward part was superb, even the schooling of the actors, though I was not moved: there was something forced and unnatural about the way the prince's serfs acted lords and princesses. Then I made my debut, had an excellent reception from the public; the prince showered me with attentions. In preparation for my second performance, I went to the theatre. They were playing *The Thieving Magpie*: I wanted to see how the prince's troupe fared in drama.

"The play had already begun when I arrived: I was upset at being late and absent-mindedly, not fully understanding what was going on the stage, looked from side to side to see the way the public were seated, all correctly according to their rank, and the curious collection of faces, all totally unlike but all with the same expression, the provincial ladies bright as American birds and the prince himself, sitting in his box looking so proud and so concerned. Suddenly I was struck by a weak woman's voice; it expressed such terrible, such profound suffering. I turned my eyes to the stage. The servant of the money-lender had recognised the old tramp as her father, a deserter from the army... I hardly heard the words, I heard the voice. 'Good God!' — I thought— 'where did so young a breast find sounds like that? They cannot be thought up, invented from the solfeggio, they must come of real suffering, as a reward for some terrible experiences.' She sees her father to the wattle-fence, she stands before him so simply, so thoughtfully; there is little hope of saving him—and when the old man goes away, instead of the words written into the part, she seemed involuntarily to give an indescribable cry—the cry of a weak, defenceless being who has been crushed by heavy unexpected sorrow. Now, twenty years later, I can still hear that desolate cry."

He paused.

"Yes, gentlemen," he said after a brief silence. "That was a great Russian actress!

"Probably everyone knows the story of *The Thieving Magpie* according to Rossini's opera. A terrible play which would leave you with nothing but despair were it not for the melodramatic end. Annette is accused of theft; it seems that everything points to her and she is justly suspected; how could one not suspect her? She is poor, she is a servant. And, if the worst comes to the worst and the accusations turn out to be unjust, what does it matter? They will say: 'Run along home, dearie; how fortunate that you are innocent!' And to what extent all this together is bound to break and offend and annihilate so tender a creature—I cannot tell you; for that you would have to see how Annette was played, how scared, trembling and offended she stood before her interrogators; her voice and appearance were a loud protest, a heart-breaking protest that showed up much of the absurdity and ugliness of the world, yet were softened by a kind of a warm, meek femininity which imparted a tender grace to all her movements, all her words. I was amazed, thunderstruck. I had expected nothing like this. In the meantime the play continued, the accusation was put, the *bailli* demanded the punishment of the proud girl; the black-clad people of the court paced the stage, deep in discussion, eminently reasonable,—then they condemned the innocent Annette and a crowd of policemen led her to prison... Yes, yes, it is as if I were seeing it now; the *bailli* says: 'Servants of the court, take this girl to the county gaol'—and the poor creature goes! But she stops once more: 'Richard,' she says. 'I am innocent, surely you have not lost faith in my innocence.' And here, through the pain of this wronged woman, sounds a cry of indignation and pride, that unbreakable pride which is born on the brink of humiliation after the loss of all hope—which develops together with a sense of dignity in the depths of despair. Do you remember the old story of how the kind German shouted from the upper circle at the slain Commendatore's men searching for Don Juan: 'He ran off to the right, down that lane! '? I almost did the same thing when Annette was led off by those soldiers. Then came the scene in the prison with the *bailli*. The old rake sees that she is innocent of the

theft and suggests that she trade her honour for her freedom. The unfortunate girl seems to grow taller, her words are scathing and a kind of profound irony in her face increases twofold the contemptuous power of them. During this scene I chanced to glance across at the prince; he was extremely affected, shifted about in his chair, now abandoning his lorgnette, now taking it up again. 'How could such a connoisseur not be struck by such acting! He must really appreciate an actress of such calibre'—so I thought. Quietly, with lowered head, with bound hands, Annette went on her way amidst the crowd of soldiers to the strident accompaniment of pipe and drum. Her whole figure expressed a kind of profound pensive bewilderment. Indeed, just imagine all the absurdity of the situation: this child, weak and humble, with her unclouded brow of innocence, and the French soldiers with their swords and bayonets and drums: where is their enemy? The enemy is the child in their midst, and they will conquer her—but she halts before the church, sinks silently to her knees, raises her thoughtful gaze to heaven, neither the reproach of a Prometheus nor the arrogance of a Titan is in that look, not at all; just the simple question: 'Why has this befallen me? Can this be justice?' She was led on. I wept like a child. You know the legend about *The Thieving Magpie*; real life is not so squeamish as playwrights, it goes on to the bitter end. Annette was executed. In the play they discover that the thief was not her but a magpie—and Annette is born back in triumph. But this Annette had understood the meaning of the play better than the author: her tormented breast did not find a single joyous note; pale, weary, Annette gazes with dull amazement at all the rejoicing going on about her; she is, it seems, quite unacquainted with the hopeful, optimistic side of things. The great shock, the bitter experience has cut through the root, and the flower, still sweetscented, is already drooping and has begun to fade; it is beyond help. How sorry I was for that girl! ..

"Oh, good heavens," he continued, wiping his face with his kerchief. "I let my imagination and memory run riot to such a degree that I seem to have let my tongue run away with me and now I'm crying; I just can't talk

on this subject without getting carried away, it happens every time... Well, the curtain came down. How much I would have given to have it raised again; to have one more look at that fading beauty, that exquisite suffering. But she was not called back. I could not go without seeing Annette, without going to her, pressing her hand, silently, conveying with a look everything that one artist can suggest to another, without thanking her for the sacred moments, the profound emotion which cleanses the soul of all kinds of cumbersome rubbish. It was as essential to me as breathing. I rushed behind the scene... In the stalls I was stopped by another connoisseur of the theatre. He called to me as he left his seat: 'Annette wasn't bad, what did you think? Not bad at all, only perhaps rather lightweight for the part.' I did not contradict; nothing I said would have convinced him and I didn't want to lose time. 'Where are you going?' asked the lackey standing at the stage door. 'I want to see Annette, you know, the actress who played the servant today.' 'Not allowed without the prince's permission.' 'My dear man, I'm an actor myself, I was on stage the day before yesterday.' 'I have no orders to let you through.' 'Please,' I said, expressively putting two fingers into the pocket of my waistcoat. 'You do know your way about,' retorted the lackey. 'Why should I offer up my back for the likes of you?' I insisted no more and set out for home, but I was near to despair, I was unhappy, and that is not just a figure of speech, an empty word... Surely some of you must at some time have totally and unaccountably fallen under the spell of a woman who was nothing to you personally, have been unable to take your eyes off her, grown accustomed to the sound of her voice, and to her smile, and become so vitally involved in this ephemeral sympathy that you are amazed by the force of your own emotion when the woman is no longer here; and then you suddenly feel yourself deserted, lonely; a kind of bitterness fills the soul and all the evening is ruined and you hurry home and are angry that the candle is guttering in your front hall and your cigar has lost its flavour ... all because you have been acting out a whole romance in the space of an hour and a half, a love story with a beginning and an end. If you have experienced any-

thing like that, then you will understand what I, as a young actor, was feeling at that moment. My longing for Annette made me quite feverish. Sick, I flung myself down on the bed, raving in a state between sleeping and waking and, whether asleep or awake, always haunted by the poor servant-girl. Now I would see her standing condemned ... so simply, astonishingly simply ... surrounded by madmen who call themselves judges. I feel bitter; not one of them is capable of understanding how, with a face like that and a voice like that, it is quite impossible that she should be guilty. Now the armed guards would lead her with bound hands to execution, actually believing that they are doing something worthwhile. Now she is borne along with cries of joy, she is told that it is all over, that she is free, — but she is tired, she has not the strength to rejoice and seems to be asking: 'But what happened? Nothing really happened, did it?' In a word, a thousand variations of the theme of *The Thieving Magpie* ran through my head all night long.

"On the following day in the morning at eleven o'clock I set off for the prince's house with the firm intention of obtaining an interview with Annette and of leaving my bones there at any cost. When I entered the main wing—there was only one open entrance to all the houses, cottages and annexes belonging to the prince—the hall porter appeared with a mace. The cross-questioning began: who did I want to see, why? I told him. The porter replied that without written permission from the prince he would not let me in. 'What a jealous Maecenas he is,' I thought. 'But how do you go about getting such a permit?'— 'Be so good as to go to the office. The manager is there and he will report to his highness.' The porter rang; a lackey came and showed me to the office. Arrogantly lounging behind the desk was the fat manager and, notwithstanding the early hour, he had already had time to assuage not only his hunger, but his thirst as well. I explained my request: probably the fat gentleman would not have made much effort to move for me but he knew the prince wanted to get me for his troupe and so, leaving for the future all the refusals and petty humiliations he might inflict on me, he thought good to yield to my request and went off in person to negotiate this important matter. A moment later he returned with

the news that the prince would sign the note and send it to the office. I had nowhere to go, so I sat down in the corner. The office was very busy. The French decorator burst in to make a violent scene with the manager and said quite un-Russian things in broken Russian; he was all untidy in a greasy coat, but looked as proud as the manager and cursed as fluently as the prince himself. Then the manager ordered some individual called Matyushka to be called in and they brought a young man with bound hands, barefoot and dressed in a grey kaftan of very coarse cloth. 'Get back to your quarter,' the manager ordered roughly. 'And if you dare do anything like that again there'll be a lot more trouble; you've forgotten Senka.' The barefoot man bowed, gave each of us a gloomy look and went out. 'Sacré', muttered the decorator and went out also, clapping his hat on his head in the middle of the room. 'I seem to know that young man's face,' I said to the lackey who happened to be near me. 'You were acting with him the day before yesterday.' 'Surely he's not the one who played the lord?' 'That's him.' 'Whatever is he all tied up like that for?' I asked, lowering my voice. The lackey glanced sideways at the agent and, seeing that he was doing accounts on the abacus and thus completely absorbed, answered in a low voice: 'They intercepted a note to one of the actresses; well, the prince doesn't like such goings on... that is he doesn't like other people behaving that way; he gave orders to put him in "solitary for a month"'.— 'Do you mean to say they brought him straight from there to the stage?'— 'Yes, they send them their parts to learn there... and then bring them bound to the theatre.' 'Discipline's a great thing,' I replied, and my desire to become a member of the prince's troupe began to cool.

"The door to the office opened noisily, everyone jumped to their feet as the prince entered. The lackey gave me a look which I understood at once: he was begging me to be discreet. The prince came straight up to me and, presenting me with the permit, said how gratified he was that an actress of his troupe had earned such approval from me, said some very flattering things about her, regretted terribly that

she was not strong in health, apologised that I had not been allowed in without his note of hand... 'There's no other way. Discipline in our business is half the secret of success; you relax the reins a little and—catastrophe; actors are a difficult lot. You know, perhaps, what the French say: it's easier to command an army than a company of actors. Don't take offence,' he added laughing, 'but you get so used to playing various tsars and grandees that you tend to carry on in a high and mighty way off-stage too.' 'Prince,' I said, 'if the French say anything of the sort it is because they know nothing of the organisation of your company and your system of management.' 'Oh, you're a great flatterer into the bargain!' remarked the prince wagging his finger at me and, beaming benevolently, he proceeded to his private study. And I—to Annette.

"Before I got to the annexe where Annette was living I was stopped at least twice by various liveried lackeys and once by a bearded caretaker. The note of hand overcame all the difficulties, however, and with beating heart I knocked timidly at the door to which I was eventually shown. A girl of about thirteen came out and I introduced myself. 'This way,' she said. 'We're expecting you.' She showed me into quite a decent room and went out through another door; a minute later the door opened and a woman all dressed in white came towards me with swift steps. It was Annette. She stretched out both hands:

" 'How did I deserve this... thank you,' she said in that very voice which had moved me so deeply the previous evening and, before I could answer, burst into tears. 'Forgive me,' she whispered, her voice unsteady with tears.—'For God's sake forgive me, it will pass... I was so happy... I'm a weak woman, forgive me.'

" 'Pray, calm yourself! What's the matter? Please don't be upset,' I said to her and my own tears fell on my waistcoat. 'If I had known that my visit...'

" 'Oh, do not say that, I beg of you,' again she offered me a hand, all wet with tears, and raised the other to cover her eyes. 'You can't imagine how you have helped me by your visit, it is—an act of charity... please bear with me, wait a moment... I'll take a sip of water and then it will all pass,' and she gave me a smile, so open-hearted and so

sad— 'I've wanted to talk to a real actor for so long now, to someone to whom I could tell everything, but I never expected such a man, and suddenly you—I am so grateful to you. Let's go into that room, we might be overheard here; don't think I am afraid, it's not that, truly it isn't. But all this spying is so humiliating, filthy... and what I want to say to you is not for their ears.'

"We went into her bedroom; she took a sip of water and sank into a chair, indicating that I should take the armchair. Where were all the compliments I had thought of, where were all the subtle critical points with which I had intended to impress her? I looked at her through my tears, looked and looked, my breast heaving. Her face was beautiful but already wasted and it told its own, terrible story: in every feature you could read the confession that had sounded in her voice the day before. It was not necessary to add much to those features, to that face: a few proper names, a few coincidences, dates; the rest was already there, clearly writ. The great black eyes shone not with oriental languor but mournfully, hopelessly; it was as though the fire that glowed in them was burning her up. The face, thin and unbelievably weary, was all flushed with weeping in an unnatural, consumptive manner; she had tossed her hair back behind the ear and sat with her elbow on the table, supporting her head with her hand. Why was Canova or Thorvaldsen not there: she was a living statue of suffering—of profound, inner suffering! 'What a noble, rich nature,' I thought, 'to perish with such elegance, to find such a poignant—and graceful—manner to express her unhappiness!' There were moments when the artist in me was stronger than the man... and I admired her as I would a work of art.

"In the meantime she regained her self-control and said:

" 'What a strange way to meet, wasn't it? But it is not the end—yet. I want to tell you about myself; I need to tell someone. Perhaps I shall die before I ever see a fellow actor again... Perhaps you will laugh, —no, that was foolish of me—you won't laugh. You're too much of a human being for that, you're more likely to think me mad. And indeed, what kind of woman inflicts her troubles on a total stranger; but you are not a stranger, I saw you on stage; you are an artist.'

"I pressed her hand and could not say a word.

" 'My story is not long, on the contrary, it is very brief,—I would not weary you; listen to it if only for the pleasure I gave you as Annette! ' "

" 'But please, please do tell me; I am drinking in every word you say although, I tell you frankly, I could write your story now without hearing it from you—or a word about you from others... I know it.' "

" 'That is just why I shall tell it to you. I have not been with this company very long. Before I was with another provincial theatre, much smaller, not nearly so well-organized, but I was happy with them, perhaps because I was young and carefree, extremely foolish and lived without thinking about life. I was so carried away by the love of art that I took no notice of outward things and I became more and more obsessed by the thought—probably a very familiar one to you—that I have a vocation for the stage; I clearly felt myself to be an actress. I studied my art all the time, developing the poor gifts I found in myself, and gladly saw how one difficulty after another was being overcome. Our landlord was a kind, simple, honest man; he respected me, appreciated my talents, gave me means to learn French, took me with him to Italy, to Paris, and I saw Talma and Mars, I lived for half a year in Paris and—what can one do! —I, being still very young, if not in years, at least in experience, returned to this little provincial theatre; it seemed to me that I was bound to the man who had taught me so much by some special ties of duty. Just one more year! —so much could have happened... But he died suddenly; in gloom and fear we waited for six weeks; they passed and his papers were opened; but the deeds granting us our freedom had been lost, or perhaps they had never really existed; perhaps he had simply been too careless to actually make them and told us that they were all ready just to keep us happy. This news broke over us like a thunder-clap; while we were still weeping and wondering what to do we were sold at a public auction and the prince bought the whole company. He gave us a good welcome, housed us well as you see, even gave us good salaries, though he was never particularly punctual at paying them out. But this was no longer our former kindly director, good-natured and easy-

going; from the first moment he made us feel the immeasurable distance between him and his players, who existed only for his pleasure. He was used to subservience; he stretched out his hand to anyone prepared to kiss it; the butler and a whole crowd of his favourites tried to imitate his manners. It was an unhappy time, very unhappy, but there were still moments of comfort; I was cosseted for my talent and still had the gift of so losing myself in art that I could forget all that was going on around me; I was delighted—and how odd and shameful this seems to me now—by the excellent organization of the theatre. All that has passed, it even seems incredible that it could ever have been so.

“I began to notice that the prince was particularly attentive to me; I understood what this meant and armed myself. The prince was not used to being jilted by members of the company. I pretended I did not understand; he considered it necessary to make his intentions more and more clearly felt; finally he sent the manager to me and promised me my freedom on condition that I should sign a contract to work with his theatre for ten years, not to speak of other promises and conditions. I sent the manager packing and for a time the persecutions ceased. Once, late at night, returning from a play, I was reading out loud to myself, something from the tragedy *Kabale und Liebe* which had just been translated from the German. You probably know it. There is so much to touch the heart, so much indignation, reproach, proof of the absurdity of the life people lead; when you read it it is as if you remembered something that really happened to you, that effects you directly, immediately. All the characters of that play leave you with a sad impression—the Hofmarschall, the lady, the old manservant whose children have volunteered to go to America... and those dear children, Ferdinand and Luise. You know, I would like to play Luise, especially the scene with Wurm where he makes her write the letter, I would so like to play it while you're here—but the prince doesn't approve such plays. Well, I was reading aloud from *Kabale und Liebe* and was altogether wrapped in the play, carried away, inspired; suddenly someone said: “Splendid, splendid!”—and put his hand on my bare shoulder. In horror I jerked away

and pressed myself against the wall. It was the prince.

“ ‘ “What is your highness’ command?” I asked in a voice trembling with fury and indignation; I am a weak woman, you have just seen that but I can also be a strong woman.’

“ ‘ (‘I’ve seen that too,’ I contradicted her, referring to certain parts of her story.)

“ ‘ “It’s not a question of command,” replied the prince, trying to lend his face an expression of charm. “Such eyes may not be commanded: they should command.”

“ ‘ I looked him straight in the eye. He was slightly taken aback, he had expected an answer of some sort. But he soon recovered, came close to me again and said: ‘*Ne faites donc pas la prude*, don’t put on airs, come on now, can’t you find another look for me, others would consider it fortune...” he took my hand; I jerked it away.

“ ‘ “Prince,” I said. “You can send me back to the village to live, but there are certain rights even for the weakest of animals which may not be taken from them, at least as they are alive. Go to those others and make them happy, if you have managed to accustom them to think of such things as their good fortune.”

“ ‘ “*Mais elle est charmante!* ’ the prince persisted. “How well that righteous wrath becomes her! Enough of play-acting.”

“ ‘ “Prince,” I said coldly. “What brings you to my room at such an hour?”

“ ‘ “By all means let us go to mine,” answered the prince. “I do not give my guests anything like so rude a reception, I am much more hospitable than you.” And he made sweetly sentimental eyes at me. At that moment the old man was utterly repulsive, with an expression... With a horrid expression...

“ ‘ “Give me your hand, prince, and come here.”

“ ‘ Quite unsuspecting, he gave me his hand; I led him to my mirror, showed him his own face and asked him.

“ ‘ “And do you think that I will go to that comical old man, to that balding *céladon*?”—And I burst out laughing.

“ ‘ The prince went pale with rage. In the first moment, he tore away his hand, raised it and would have struck me in the face had he had less self-control. As it was he confined himself to coarse swearing and left the room, shouting:

“ ‘ “I’ll teach you to forget yourself! Who do you think

you're talking to? I am an actress, you think, but you are my serf-girl—not an actress...”

“I banged the door shut behind him and threw down a table-knife onto the floor, which I had picked without thinking when I was interrupted in my reading and then hidden in my sleeve just in case.

“What my feelings were and how I got through that night only you can understand. I don't want to tell you all the minor, insulting vexations which beset me from that day. I was deprived of my best parts, tormented by being made constantly to act parts which were quite unsuited to my gift, all our management here began to treat me roughly and address me as an inferior. I was never given a decent costume; I don't want to tell about all that because it shows the prince in quite a good light; he might have dealt with me very differently, but he was making an effort to be liberal. He treated me to humiliation and persecution when he might have punished me in quite another fashion. And to tell the truth I don't think they would have got me down by such petty means, not soon, anyway... worst of all were the prince's last words; they were graven on my mind, on my heart; I don't know how to convey it to you, but it was as if they were burning me up like a fever. I could not shake them off, could not forget... Since then it was as though I was consumed by fever. Sleep brings me no refreshment, by evening my forehead is burning and in the morning I am shaking with cold. Would you believe that since that day my costumes have to be taken in every week, and I am glad of it, but at the same time I am afraid, afraid and in pain. But could it have been otherwise? Evidently not... And ever since I, a sick woman, in a state bordering on dementia would come on stage and they would clap and clap, not understanding my acting. From then on I played one and the same part, but the audience never realised. My talent is fading. I am becoming more and more one-sided; some parts I play without proper attention, they have become intolerable for me. And so it's all over—life and talent... Farewell to art, good-bye to all my love of the stage! I shall live a year or two longer with the prince's words: they should be carved on my grave.’

“She fell silent. I found no words to comfort her. After

a brief silence, she continued:

“ ‘About two months ago there was a benefit night. I asked for a certain costume and was refused. “In that case,” I told the director, “I shall buy what I require with my own money and have it made for me.”

“ ‘ “It’s not allowed for you to go anywhere without permission; where’s your note of hand?”

“ ‘I was irritated and went to the office. The prince was there and I went up to him to ask permission to go to the shops.

“ ‘ “It’s a strange time for your lovers to make assignations with you—before lunch! ” said the prince, to the indescribable delight of the manager and the lackeys.

“ ‘The blood rushed to my head; my behaviour had always been irreproachable; the insult made me lose my temper.

“ ‘ “So it’s to guard our honour that you keep us locked in? Well, prince, here is my hand, my word of honour, that in less than a year I shall prove to you that all your measures are insufficient! ”

“ ‘And on that I left the room before he had time to say another word.’

“At this point she paused, excited, exhausted. I begged her to be calm, to drink some water. I held her cold, damp hand in mine... her head drooped, it seemed as though it was a great effort for her to continue. But suddenly she raised her head again, proudly and majestically, and looking at me with clear eyes she said:

“ ‘I kept my word! ’

“ ‘I was ready to fling myself at the feet of this woman. So lofty, so strong, so wonderfully stylish did she seem in this moment of confession!

“ ‘We were silent.

“ ‘My romance left none of those brief, sweet memories of happiness or joy, that others seem to experience. Everything about it was feverish and crazed, it was not love but despair, hopelessness... I won’t tell you about it because there’s really nothing to tell.’

“ ‘Does the prince know?’ I asked.

“ ‘Most probably he knows, he knows everything... And I would be in despair if he didn’t know. I’m not afraid of him. I will die in this room, but I will not ask anything of

him, I'll keep that word, too. The only thing I feared was to die without meeting a real person... Now you understand what your visit has meant to me... One thing is not good, though, and all the worse because I never thought about it: the baby will be his and he'll say to him: "Before all else, you belong to me." But still, I am so weak, so ill, that if God is merciful he may take him too.'

"'But couldn't you somehow... I would do anything.'

"'No, you see how strictly we are kept.'

"'Poor actress!'—I thought. 'What a mad, criminal man was it who set your feet on this path with no thought for the life you would have to lead! Why did they wake you up? Only in order to give you that terrible, crushing piece of information? It would have been better if your soul had slept on in ignorance. That great talent, had you never discovered it, would not have become a source of torment. Perhaps, from time to time, some inexplicable yearning would have stirred in your breast, but at least it would have remained inexplicable.'

"'It is time for us to part,' she said sadly.

"'Good-bye, thank you; I so wish...'

"'She smiled.

"'Remember me sometimes...'

"'A great Russian actress has been lost to the world...

"'I went out, the tears streaming down my face.

"'Do you know what's happened? You'll be so pleased,' said my friend when I returned home. 'The prince's manager was here just now, was surprised that you had not yet returned and told me to tell you that the prince wishes to engage your services on the following terms,' and he triumphantly handed me a written contract.

"'The conditions were excellent.

"'And shall I tell you something?' I replied. 'Oh the way home I called in to the coachman and hired the troika which brought us here. You can stay if you wish, but I'm going—now.'

"'Are you out of your mind?'

"'I don't know, but I'm not staying here: the climate is not a healthy one for an artist. Don't you agree? Just think a little and let's go back to our old theatre with its backdrops on which it's hard to tell a shady alley from a river, where the sea is calm and the walls are wavy. Let's go!'

"‘I wouldn’t mind going back,’ replied my friend, the most happy-go-lucky of mortals. ‘But at this rate we may die of hunger.’

"‘And here of satiety. You can cure hunger with a hunk of bread and with our physique we’ll always be able to earn ourselves that. The kind of sicknesses that come from satiety are not so easily cured.’

"My friend thought deeply; I did not want to overpersuade him. Suddenly he began to laugh.

"‘Ha-ha-ha! I’ll go with you, brother. I’ll go with you! Do you know what’s just occurred to me—how surprised Vassily Petrovich will be when we turn up again a week from now. He *will* be surprised!’

"The thought of surprising Vassily Petrovich quite reconciled my friend to the unexpected journey. He only asked:

"‘That’s settled then, but what should we say to the manager?’

"‘No need to think about that; we won’t be here to answer tomorrow if we leave today; they will just tell him that we left yesterday for where we came from. And the prince will get as big a surprise as Vassily Petrovich.’

"‘Excellent, that really is excellent, because the offer was such a good one; let him realise that not everything in life can be bought!’ And he set about packing up our few possessions, whistling a tune from *The Caliph of Bagdad*.

"That was all. To round off the story I’ll add that two hours later we were bumping along in the cart. I felt very badly, there was bitter gall in my heart; I tried looking at the road, staring at the landscape, smoking cigars—nothing helped. And as if to mock me the sky was grey, the wind was chill, the distance wrapped in rising mist from the marshes, and all the views which had so delighted my eyes on the way there were lost in gloom: whether it was because I was seeing them in reversed succession or for some other reason, they now gave me no pleasure. Even the luxurious manor-houses with their parks and conservatories which stood so proudly among the blackened and half-rotting peasant huts seemed gloomy to me."

"What did they do with Annette after that? Did you ever see her again?"

"No. She died two months after giving birth to her child."

The actor wiped away the tears that were coming down his cheek. The young men were silent for a while: it was as though he and they represented a finely-sculptured monument on the grave of Annette.

“That’s all as it should be,” said the Slav, rising to his feet. “But why didn’t she have a secret marriage?”

January 28, 1846

Translated by Avril Pyman

DMITRY GRIGOROVICH

(1822–1899)

The stories of Dmitry Grigorovich, dramatic in their wrathful protest against the oppressive system of serfdom, are mostly about peasants, whom he portrays vividly and unforgettably.

Grigorovich grew up on a country estate, and was intimately familiar with the mores and manners of the landed gentry, as well as the relationships between the serfs and their masters. "I learnt the Russian language from our household serfs, from our peasants, and largely from Nikolai, my father's old valet," wrote Grigorovich in his recollections. "He would watch for hours until I'd be allowed to go out of doors, he'd pick me up in his arms and then take me about the meadows and groves, telling me all kinds of adventures and tales... It was only in the warmth of Nikolai's affection that I thawed out from all the cold and loneliness of my miserable childhood..."

Grigorovich made his first experimental attempts at writing during his years of study at the Engineering School in St. Petersburg and later at the Academy of Arts. It was then he met Nikolai Nekrasov, the democrat-poet, who drew him into the work of writing for the collections he was bringing out and round which rallied those of the authors who championed the method of critical realism. The influence

of Nekrasov's freedom-loving ideas and also of Vissarion Belinsky, a critic of revolutionary-democratic convictions had a decisive influence on the development of Grigorovich's talent. Uppermost in the minds of the revolutionary democrats was the imperative need to abolish serfdom and create better material and social conditions for the emancipated peasants. They also pondered on the role of the common people in history. Grigorovich's stories "Village" (1846) and "Hapless Anton" (1847) are a rousing call to struggle against serfdom.

His social awareness lent a special importance to his stories, and his simple and clear language enhanced their popularity with readers.

Nikolai Chernyshevsky wrote: "In Grigorovich's stories there is live thought, there is a genuine knowledge of the people's life and there is love for the people: he brings out the peasants not as curiosities speaking an outlandish language, which is the role they are generally assigned, but to act and talk like living people and to be whole-heartedly sympathised with. In this lies the secret of the constant success of his stories and novels about peasants."

CHRISTIAN CHARITY*

*The police will come: who drowned him?
Try and prove it wasn't me...*

A. S. Pushkin

The autumn night had cloaked the village Komkovo in darkness hours and hours ago. The weather was foul with a persistent drizzle of half-rain and half-snow, and a cold, blustering wind howling and moaning in the fields and plains. However, the wind, the slush and the darkness presented no hindrance whatsoever to the celebration of Komkovo's patron saint's day, and the merrymaking, which the villagers had been looking forward to for a whole year, was in full swing. There were crowds of people out in the street. Disjointed singing, ejaculations, loud talk and bursts of laughter were heard here, there and everywhere; from time to time these human sounds were drowned out by the angry voice of the storm which, howling and whistling, attacked the tumbledown wattle fences and huts, but once the wind had rushed past and the storm subsided for a moment, the singing and shouting sounded louder than ever. Lights were burning in the windows of nearly all the cottages lining the street, and the long line of these lights, reflected in the puddles in dark-red streaks, announced that inside the houses the revelling was also going apace. In short, the inhabitants of Komkovo were celebrating in fine style.

But while the merry-making was so unanimous from one end of the village to the other, in the house of the Komkovo mistress herself it was particularly quiet that night. The neighbours had failed to gather at Maria Petrovna's as usual on that day, probably deterred by the bad weather, the state of the roads, or something else, but

whatever the reason no guests came. To keep Maria Petrovna company there was only Stepanida Artemyevna, a lieutenant's penniless widow, who had been living in the house for over two years now as a sort of poor relation, and Sophia Ivanovna, who was Maria Petrovna's nearest neighbour. The three ladies were sitting in a small and cosy room facing the street.

Stepanida Artemyevna sat apart in a corner, near the uncurtained window, knitting a stocking. Tea was ready and waiting on a small table in front of her. A huge, clumsy, red-copper samovar, which took up almost half the space on the small table, was puffing and blowing like an obese man carrying a heavy load on a hot summer day; thick grey steam poured from it, gurgling and whirling in streams, now aiming at the window and spattering it with large drops, now suddenly swerving aside to take a go at the bit of candle, standing there amid the cups and tea things.

At this unexpected attack on the part of its neighbour, the candle flame wavered and threw an even dimmer light on the lieutenant's widow, a woman with a harsh and wooden appearance, dressed in deep mourning like all lieutenants' widows in general. The other two ladies sat near the stove, farther away from the window. Their faces were clearly distinguishable in the red light of the brightly burning fire and, what is more, their long, angular profiles were projected in black on the wall. One of these two ladies, the mistress of the house, was a little old purblind woman with a meek, good-natured face, but it was a humble simplicity rather than those two qualities that came to mind first. She wore an old black shawl, a house-dress of black cotton with white specks, and flimsy bonnet whose dark ribbons in spite of the wearer's immobility were moving feverishly all the time. This happened because the old woman's head, feeble enough already, had acquired the bad habit of shaking ever since that night when the servants awakened her with the frightening news that the village bathhouse was on fire. Sophia Ivanovna was the very opposite of her hostess in looks. Obviously, those taut red cheeks, threatening to burst any minute, those gray, protuberant eyes, that very low forehead, squashed nose and black hair, with no white in it although she was

pushing fifty, could belong only to a spirited, energetic woman. The three ladies kept a profound silence. The quiet was disrupted only by the snapping and crackling of the logs as they shot sparks out on to the floor, and the squeaky singing of the samovar, seconded now and then by the sulky grumbling of the lapdog, Rosie, nestling behind her mistress's back on the sofa. From outside came the distant hubbub of the crowd roaming the street; now and again this hubbub seemed to draw nearer and, merging with a suddenly ferocious howl of the wind and the drumming of the rain on the window, produced such a terrible din that even the canary, dozing in the cage hanging above Stepanida Artemyevna's head, jumped in fright, poked its head out from under its wing and started shaking out its feathers.

"Hush, Rosie, hush," Maria Petrovna tried to quiet her shrilly yapping lapdog. "Merciful God, have they gone out of their minds? They'll set the village on fire before we know it... Stepanida Artemyevna, do look out of the window, there's a dear, and see if they haven't done it already."

Saying this, Maria Petrovna fretfully turned her thin face to the window and crossed herself with especial piety.

"I can't see anything," the poor relation replied, rubbing the glass with her hand. "It's plastered with snow all the way up."

"Now, really, Maria Petrovna dear, why must you allow such wild goings-on," said Sophia Ivanovna in her coarse voice that could not be better suited to her graceless appearance. "You're courting disaster with your kindness; you may be sure that one day your own serfs will set fire to your Komkovo! "

"Holy Mother of God, Saint Sergius... oh! my darling Anyutochka (God rest her soul!) revered him..." moaned Maria Petrovna, raising her eyes ceilingward and crossing herself piously again and again.

"Ah, yes, you may be sure they'll burn down your village for you," continued her neighbour. "If you let them get away with these wild, outrageous goings on. And, as ill luck would have it, the weather's always windy on this particular day; it's autumn, of course, so anything might happen..."

"Oh dear, but what can I do with them, Sophia Ivanovna?"

"What d'you mean, what can you do? Who's the mistress here? You just tell them: I do not wish it, I forbid it, I won't have such wild goings on, I'll have you whipped... and that will be that, because really anything might happen... hear that wind, d'you hear it?"

Sophia Ivanovna inclined her head sideways the better to hear, and the other two ladies did likewise.

A piercing wind was howling around the house and rattling the window shutters; the rain poured unabated, now falling on the roof with muffled plops, now drumming rapidly on the window panes.

"Oh, Sophia Ivanovna, when I think of all those poor homeless orphans plodding somewhere in this weather! " spoke Maria Petrovna after a brooding silence. "And with no shelter anywhere for the poor things! "

"And you, I suppose, would like to take them all in? They're too many, my dear Maria Petrovna, you couldn't build almshouses for all of them in your Komkovo, you'd run short of money too... D'you know what, instead of worrying your head about them, better tell me my fortune once more."

These words had a magical effect on the old lady: her usually lifeless face became animated with a look of the liveliest interest, and something like a smile touched her withered lips. It must be said that Maria Petrovna was famed as a fortuneteller throughout the neighbourhood, and all the vanity there was in the kind old lady was centred on this activity. With a self-complacent little smile she took her grimy deck of cards, shuffled them and, her head shaking more rapidly than usual, ordered the lieutenant's widow:

"Stepanida Artemyevna, put the candle on this table and move closer to us with your knitting, there's a dear."

Stepanida Artemyevna, however, lighted another candle, set it in front of the mistress and, without saying a word, went back to her chair. The two old ladies' profiles on the wall became even longer and wider now; Sophia Ivanovna's head assumed the shape of a giant pumpkin, and Maria Petrovna's nose stretched to such a sharp point that it seemed to reach the tea table and at the slightest wavering of the flames in the stove to peck at the sugar in the bowl or

else to get caught in the bonnet of the lieutenant's widow, who was back at her knitting.

"You like to be the Queen of Hearts, I know, Sophia Ivanovna, you always are, aren't you?" Maria Petrovna asked, her head bobbing in affirmation.

"Very well, I'll be the Queen of Hearts, if you like," replied Sophia Ivanovna, moving up closer.

"My, how well things look for you," spoke Maria Petrovna, her thin fingers moving very quickly about the table as she laid out the cards. "My, how well... I see great interest on the part of the King of Clubs, really great... but, wait a moment, what's this?" She paused, rubbing her brow in thought. "Ah, a blond woman, rather past her youth, is standing in the way..."

"Hm, a blonde, you say? I wonder who it can be? Oh well, never mind, carry on."

"You'll receive a letter from far away, from the road, that's the road, you see? Let me think a moment... There seems to be an illness here, not a serious one, just a slight cold or something ... but on the whole things look very, very well for you ... an interest, a great interest from the King of Clubs, then..."

"Maria Petrovna, Sophia Ivanovna, do you want any more tea?" the lieutenant's widow interrupted the two ladies dryly. "If not I'll have the samovar taken away."

"Wait, Stepanida Artemyevna, perhaps Sophia Ivanovna would like another cup..."

"No, thank you, my dear, I'm full up as it is... I couldn't hold any more."

Suddenly the storm gave such a thunderous roar that the three ladies started simultaneously. At almost the same moment a dog started howling outside the window where the lieutenant's widow was sitting; the howling began on a low note, but as the burst of wind subsided and quiet returned to the street, it rose louder and louder until at last it died away with the parting shriek of the wind. The lapdog, which had been lying on the sofa, did more than grumble this time: she quickly jumped down to the floor, leapt on to the window sill and started scratching at the window pane as if she had gone mad, squealing and barking at the top of her voice.

"Hush, Rosie, hush," poor, frightened Maria Petrovna moaned in a pained voice. "Oh what can it mean! Can you hear that dog howling outside, Sophia Ivanovna? And it's not the first time either, can it mean that there'll be a death in the house?"

"What rubbish," replied Sophia Ivanovna. "The scary things you always have on your mind! It's a dog howling, that's all."

"Oh, Holy Mother of God," Maria Petrovna began to intone again, crossing herself and raising her eyes ceilingward. "Oh, Saint Sergius whom my darling Anyutchka (God rest her soul) revered.... Stepanida Artemyevna, do push Rosie down, look how she dashed about, she might break the window pane."

The lieutenant's widow flung down her knitting angrily, shouted at the lapdog, and muttering something through set teeth marched out of the room. A minute later in came Palashka, a tall, tow-headed and somewhat pockmarked maid, and proceeded to clear the tea table.

"Palashka, what dog is that howling all the time?" her mistress asked her. "Not a moment of peace all evening..."

"It's Snaky, madam," replied Palashka with a sullen look. "They threw her pups into the river last night... That's why she howls, I guess. We tried to chase her away from the porch, but there's no managing the cursed bitch."

"Oh, it's *that* dog! Fancy what she went and did this summer, Sophia Ivanovna! She went mad and bit Fetiska, the coachman's son, on the shin, I can't begin to tell you what a scare she gave me then! "

"What did you treat the bites with, Maria Petrovna?"

"The usual thing, what I always do: first, I sprinkled the wounds with arsenic, and then I made him drink an infusion of plantain leaves three times a day."

"You needn't have done it, a waste of money, nothing else. If you like I'll teach you another cure, a much cheaper one too; I was told it in secret by one lady ... but, very well, I'll share the secret with you, what won't one do for a dear friend! What with you always treating the sick, it'll come in very useful, I'm sure."

"Ah, dear Sophia Ivanovna, you have no idea how

greatly you'll oblige me... you won't believe me if I tell you how much all those medicines cost me; would you believe it, people come to me from other villages too, the grateful patient usually brings some eggs, fish, or a bit of honey, but I never take anything, of course, they're poor people, you know, so never mind, but my money just goes and goes..."

"That's the whole point," Sophia Ivanovna broke in. "Now listen to what I have to tell you." She moved up closer still and said with an air of secrecy: "Next time a thing like that happens, I mean someone gets bitten by a mad dog, just take a crust of bread, the most ordinary crust of bread, and write on it in ink or anything you like, it doesn't matter, the following three words: Osia, Asia and Elsosia, and then let your patient eat the crust: he'll be as right as rain on the instant! "

"Really! " cried Maria Petrovna, flinging up her hands in delighted amazement.

"Really. Just like that! The lady who told me the secret said that she had cured five people in a row with that," Sophia Ivanovna rattled this off.

"Oh, dear friend, I'm so grateful to you! I don't have to tell you how expensive arsenic is, and then it isn't always there for the buying either. I'm so grateful to you, so, so grateful! "

"And I'm pleased, Maria Petrovna, I'm glad I've been of help. Well, since one good deed calls for another, as people say, there's a little something you can do for me too."

"What is it, pray?"

"Only this: did you plant potatoes this year?"

"We did, Sophia Ivanovna, we did, and the potatoes we dug up were so big, the Lord be thanked..."

"In that case I'll ask you shamelessly, quite shamelessly, to let me have a small sack of potatoes—I didn't plant any, you see."

Sophia Ivanovna said all this with that charming jocular-ity under cover of which people, intending to make a sure touch, ask really shameless favours. And Maria Petrovna was naturally only too pleased to help out her neighbour.

"What a poor memory I have, honestly," she said after some moments of busy thinking. "Fancy, I've already for-

gotten what you told me, I mean what I'm to write on the crust—so, sia, sa, now what was it again?"

"Asia, Osia and Elsosia," Sophia Ivanovna replied most graciously. "You'd better write it down on a piece of paper."

"Yes, yes, you're quite right, I'd better. Stepanida Artemyevna, there's a dear, fetch me an inkpot and my calendar," she said to the lieutenant's widow, who was at that moment re-entering the room.

When she had done as she was told, Stepanida Artemyevna angrily snipped the candle, twisted her thin lips, and sat down near the window again. Maria Petrovna wrote down the recipe and, exhausted by the effort, reclined against the back of the sofa. The small room was sunk in silence once again, which, as before, was disrupted only by Rosie's growls, the sudden onslaughts of the wind, and now and then the revellers' singing and shouting.

Some twenty minutes later in came the pockmarked maid Parasha together with Fyokla from the farm yard. Fyokla stepped forward, bowed low before the mistress, and announced that a strange old man had come to the farm yard, he was there sitting on the threshold of the cottage, moaning and groaning and begging to see the mistress.

"He's that poorly, mistress dear, that poorly, he looks all in," Fyokla added, shaking her head worriedly. "And not a word does he say, he only moans and moans to break your heart, he's so weak, mistress dear, I was afraid to leave it till the morrow, there's no one about, everyone is celebrating, so that's why I came to tell you, madam..."

"Holy Mother of God protect us!" Maria Petrovna uttered on a deep sigh. "He must be very ill, the poor soul. I'm coming at once, Fyokla, wait for me in the pharmacy."

"What are you about, Maria Petrovna?" cried Sophia Ivanovna, holding Maria Petrovna back by the hand. "Surely you don't mean to go to the farm yard at this time of night and in this weather? Bless you, my dear, think what you're doing!"

"No, no, let me go, Sophia Ivanovna dearest," Maria Petrovna protested. "My heart's uneasy."

"I shan't let you go and that's that."

"Oh please do, Sophia Ivanovna dearest, my heart is uneasy, I'll go and take a look, maybe urgent help is needed."

"Urgent help, indeed! He won't die, never you fear. He must have been given too much to drink right here, in your village, what with the holiday spirit and everything, and that's all there is to it."

"But just the same I'll go and take a look at him, dearest Sophia Ivanovna, at least I'll feel easier in my mind."

Saying this, Maria Petrovna went into the adjoining room, an even smaller one where the walls from ceiling to floor were hung with bunches of drying herbs, and where also stood an old-fashioned pretentious cupboard with legions of little bottles, jars, measuring glasses and such things ranged on the shelves behind glass. This room was called the "pharmacy". Maria Petrovna quickly pulled on a pair of felt boots, wrapped herself into an old cloak, lined with hare, wound the ends of her shawl round her neck, and started out for the farm yard accompanied by Fyokla, who was carrying a barn lantern.

"This way, mistress dear, this way, if you please," muttered Fyokla, holding the lantern in one hand and supporting the old lady with the other. "Mind your step here, come this way, if you please, look at all those puddles..."

"Oh Saint Sergius, protect us," Maria Petrovna intoned plaintively as she splashed through the mud. "Ouch, I almost missed my step!"

"Holy Saints, don't forsake us," Fyokla added, redoubling her efforts to bring the mistress safely through the puddles. "Hope we don't come to grief... that wind's fair knocking you off your feet, and the snow blinding the eyes... This way, if you please, it's a bit drier here..."

Soon they turned the corner of the house; Fyokla beamed the light across to the opposite corner of the long yard, and the two women started in that direction.

The indefatigable revellers were still shouting and singing out in the street, and the lights, glimmering through the darkness here and there, showed that the merrymaking was nowhere near the end yet.

At last Fyokla brought her mistress to the farm yard and stopped in front of a gloomy cottage, surrounded on

three sides with roofed sheds. Begging the mistress not to move a step, so as not to get soaked in the rain which poured in a noisy waterfall from the roofs of these sheds, Fyokla set the barn lantern in the mud and, throwing back the latch with an unexpectedly loud clatter, opened the narrow door, picked up the lantern, and with great care led the mistress into the entry—a large, dark place with packed earth underfoot instead of floor boards.

“Mind your step, mistress dear,” Fyokla cautioned Maria Petrovna. “He might be lying on the floor here somewhere, I left him lying on the threshold here when I went to tell you...”

However, there was no one in the entry and Maria Petrovna, stepping gingerly in the dark-red glow of the lantern, entered the cottage proper. The silence was utter in the pitch-dark room; an acrid smell of smoke implied that the splinter, burning for light, had just gone out. In the light of the lantern what the mistress saw first of all in this dwelling of Fyokla’s were the bare timber walls and a corner of the tall, sooty stove; looking around her she fancied she saw a figure, covered with some straw, half-lying and half-sitting on the floor.

“Bring the light closer, Fyokla,” the mistress said in a small, embarrassed voice, and crossed herself surreptitiously under her cloak.

Fyokla took the guttered candle out of the lantern and held it at almost floor level. In the yellowish, tremulous light Maria Petrovna clearly saw the long, bony frame of a very old man, who looked at least eighty. His face, with regular features and framed in a sparse greyish growth of downy hair, had fallen on his narrow, bony chest, barely covered with a tattered shirt through the holes in which showed his equally bony shoulders and elbows. His shirt was soaked through; under it the old man seemed to be shrivelled up like an autumn leaf, struck by the frost. The black shadow falling from his bony chin midway to his chest ran a deep, angular course which showed up the thinness of his shrunken body all the more starkly. But in spite of a certain sharpness, lent to the old man’s features by his terrible gauntness and also the harsh patches of shadow and light, his face preserved the mildest and meekest of expres-

sions; even his parched, bloodless lips betokened the good nature with which the whole of him seemed to be suffused. The old man was lying on the floor, as has been said already. His bony frame, propped up on the elbow of his right arm cast a deep shadow on the wall behind him and the wide bench against which he rested his long legs, shod only in bast shoes. His left arm lay lifelessly on his patched hempen bag, containing nothing by the slender look of it, and his shabby hat. Rain water had seeped on to the floor from the bag and the hat.

The old man's martyred look aroused involuntary commiseration, and Maria Petrovna felt her composure returning to her little by little. She took a step forward and bent over him. Knowing at once that she was the mistress, he tried to get up, but his effort was futile and he sank down once more. Raising a trembling hand to his chest he fastened his dim eyes on her and spoke between painful gasps for breath:

"Forgive me, madam, I can't get up... I'm sorry, I've no strength left..."

"Don't, don't," Maria Petrovna hastened to calm him. "Don't try to get up, stay where you are... tell me, what's ailing you?"

The old man tried to sit up again, but a fit of coughing seized him, and finally he brought out, pausing after each word:

"It's my chest, madam... aches all over... won't let me walk... The worst is I can't breathe ... Four months and more it won't let me be..."

"What started it, a cold?"

"No, madam," the old man dropped his head in exhaustion. "It wasn't a cold... I hurt it badly..."

"Oh, and how did that happen?"

"I'm a roofer, you see, madam. Back home... they were setting up a windmill... all the workers were green chaps... so it was me who was sent up to tie the rafters together... had to be done, you see... the weather was bad... in the spring it was, madam... and I went and rolled off the roof and struck my chest against the logs below... Since then the pain won't let me be..."

"Oh, you poor soul," said Maria Petrovna, shaking her head pitifully. "You ought to have been bled right there and then, or have gone to town at once to see a doctor..."

"I did go, madam," the old man replied in a weakening voice. "They wouldn't admit me... no free beds at the time, you see..."

The effort of speaking drained him of the little strength he had; the sound died on his lips before he had finished the last word, he gasped for breath and a cough which would never stop, it seemed, racked his emaciated body. Suddenly, a spasm contorted his face, his hands dropped, and he fell in a dead faint on the straw.

"Water! Fyokla, water, quick!" screamed Maria Petrovna, shaking in a panic. "Good Lord, good Lord! Holy Mother of God, protect us! Hurry, Fyokla, sprinkle his face. Merciful God, what's the matter with him?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," muttered Fyokla in fright as she mercilessly doused the old man's head with icy water. "It's not the first time either ... as soon as he came in the same thing happened... Oh dear, let's hope he doesn't go and die... Wish we'd asked him where he's from... just to be on the safe side... Oh dear, what a wicked thing to happen!"

The old man took a deep breath, opened his eyes and slowly tried to sit up: apparently, he felt it was unseemly for him to be lying down in the presence of the mistress.

"Where are you from?" Maria Petrovna asked, her head shaking more vigorously than ever.

The look of anxiety on the mistress's face did not miss him; he must have understood what she was afraid of and what he stood in danger of. He did his utmost to appear as calm and well as possible, but his speech was even more faltering than before.

"I'm a bit better now, madam... These fits come over me sometimes. But it's a small matter, madam ... only don't deny me your kindness ... don't throw me out without help like the others did (here he raised beseeching, tear-filled eyes at her). It's alright, madam, it has passed already, don't be afraid... I trusted too much in my strength... and walked a good many versts..."

"But where are you from?" insisted Maria Petrovna.

"Who, me?" moaned the old man.

"Yes, where d'you live?"

"Far away, more than ninety versts away."

"Who d'you belong to?.."

"Bakushina... Anastasia Semyonovna..."

"Dear me, what a silly old man you are, really!" said Maria Petrovna, her head shaking quickly. "You ought to have remained in town until there was a hospital bed for you."

"I wanted to, but they told me I'd have a long wait, that's why I started back for the village."

"You ought to have waited at home then, they'd have made you well in the hospital, I'm sure."

"I had nowhere to live, madam," the old man replied with a sigh. "I've neither land nor house... because of my old age I've been freed of taxes and duties for eight years now, I'm a landless peasant. I've no family, no kin."

"But you did stay somewhere, didn't you?"

"One of our villagers gave me a home... I helped him with odd jobs until God took my strength away... He gave me a place to sleep and food too, madam. But when I had no more strength left, when that trouble befell me, I mean when I crashed on those logs, I became useless to him. And he stopped feeding me... Naturally, if you're no relative you won't be fed for free..."

"D'you mean to say you have no relatives left at all?"

"I have, madam, I have a daughter," the old man replied, livening up. "Only she doesn't live in our village... She's married to a gardener and lives thirty versts from here. I did go to her and stayed all summer with her, but they're poor people, you see, madam, and I was a mouth too many to feed." He heaved a sorrowful sigh. "They didn't say anything, but I could see for myself that feeding an old useless man like me was a burden to them, and so I went begging. I was in Zapolye the other day and I heard about your kindness, and came here to you, but it seems the going was harder than I reckoned for, it turned so cold, what with the rain and the wind, and I got worse... Please don't deny me your kindness I'll pray for you day and night ... It's such blessedness here in this warm cottage, I can feel the chill going out of my body... don't deny me your mercy..."

"You poor old soul, don't fret, don't fret," said Maria Petrovna. "Have a good rest here, I'll send you some medicine. A nice hot drink will ease the pain in your chest... I'll send you some salve too."

The old man did not speak, but the look he gave her expressed his gratitude better than any words could have done. Maria Petrovna and Fyokla, who had in the meantime stuck the candle back in the lantern, hurried out.

* * *

"Well, what was the upset about," Sophia Ivanovna demanded, meeting her hostess in the pharmacy. "Who's the old beggar?"

"Oh, Sophia Ivanovna, better not ask!" uttered Maria Petrovna, fluttering her hands in perplexity. "This very, very old man came from more than ninety versts away in this weather, with life barely flickering in him... He hurt his chest, poor soul, falling from a windmill. Oh, I honestly don't know how to help him, perhaps I'll brew some elderberries and sage ... a nice hot drink will ease his breathing, and then I'll tell Palashka to rub his chest with that decoction of mine ... what do you think?"

"See you don't get into real trouble one day with your medicating, Maria Petrovna. You've just said that life barely flickers in him. Now what if he gives up the ghost on your estate, what if he dies, I mean, what then? D'you know what a case they'll make of it? Why, you'll never get the law off your back. Haven't you heard of the bother Yegor Ivanovich Redechkin had the year before last through an occurrence exactly like this one? Come to your senses, Maria Petrovna, think what you're doing!"

"Don't scare me, Sophia Ivanovna dear, my heart is uneasy as it is," cried the old lady in fright. "Palashka, Palashka, come here, you fool, climb on to that chair quickly and take down two bunches of herbs from that beam there. Now, run to the kitchen, ask Praskovia to give you a copper teakettle, and bring it to the other room. Is the stove still going there? Good. Hurry now, hurry... I'll give him a nice, hot elderberry brew to drink, and maybe the Lord will have mercy on us."

A minute later Maria Petrovna was already sitting in front of the stove, instructing Palashka to keep stirring the medicinal herbs and in the same breath muttering prayers.

Sophia Ivanovna and the lieutenant's widow, who was still knitting her stocking, sat down beside her. Sophia Ivanovna reiterated her warnings to Maria Petrovna over and over again, each time citing the case of Yegor Ivanovich Redechkin in confirmation of her apprehensions.

Meanwhile the storm raged and raved, the wind wailed plaintively all round the house, and the rain drummed mercilessly on the window panes; the dog's forlorn voice could also be heard, seconding the mournful tune of the turbulent autumn night. The water in the kettle was already coming to a boil when Fyokla cannoned into the room; in her haste she had not even thought of first brushing off the lumps of wet snow from the shawl covering her head and shoulders; her face was stark with alarm. At the sight of her Maria Petrovna opened her mouth and eyes wide and sat thus, as if petrified, Sophia Ivanovna alone kept her head.

"What is it? Has something happened?" she asked Fyokla rising to her feet.

"The old man, he's dying, I think, he's almost quite gone," the woman said, waving her arms in agitation and spraying both ladies with rain water.

"Holy Mother of God, Saint Sergius," moaned Maria Petrovna.

"Well, Maria Petrovna, what did I tell you?" Sophia Ivanovna demanded triumphantly.

"Oh dear, what am I to do with him now?"

"I'll tell you," replied Sophia Ivanovna, striking the air energetically with a hand. "You must simply order your men to take him to the highroad, set him down there and let him go and die anywhere he wants! "

"Too true, mistress dear," Fyokla said, sprinkling the old lady. "To be sure there's this storm and all, but all the same it's better to send him away to be out of trouble's way."

"You see, Maria Petrovna? Even a common peasant woman tells you the same thing," spoke Sophia Ivanovna. "Think what you're doing! Listen to me, I wish you well, you know. Reason for yourself: it's holiday time and when the police begin to investigate they'll believe that he was killed here, on your estate. Have him taken away as quickly

as possible, I'm telling you, he's no concern of yours, you must think of yourself first."

For a whole minute Maria Petrovna was unable to say anything; she gazed at the holy lamp burning before the icon in the corner, as if her whole life was vested in the tip of the little flame. At long last, she turned her good-natured face to Fyokla and said in quite a firm voice:

"Run quickly to the elder, tell him to have the old man taken wherever he says in a cart... And tell him to give the poor soul some pie for the road... wait, I'll pour this brew into a jug... let him have a nice, hot drink before he goes... I say, Palashka! Get a loaf of white bread from the larder and give it to her ... and you, Fyokla, come with me." She bid Fyokla follow her into the pharmacy, gave her a pot of salve and said: "Here you are, tell him to rub it into his chest every morning and every night... Oh Lord, have mercy on us! Go now, go... God go with you."

Her hands full with the loaf, the jug of brew and the jar of salve, Fyokla decided to go home first and take a look at the old man. She found him stretched out on the floor, as before, with no sign of life. However, on closer examination she saw that the shirt was stirring faintly on the chest of the sufferer. She crossed herself, put the lantern and the things she had brought on the window sill, and rushed to the house of Demyan, the village elder.

Demyan's house was packed with people, and to reach the "red corner" where the voice of the elder's wife quavered like the taut wire of a scutcher, Fyokla had to squeeze through a thick crowd of women, girls, boys and men. The hostess, a flushed, apple-cheeked woman stood in front of the miller, a big man with a purple face, bowing low to him and begging him to have some more pie; she did not seem to notice that the table before him was loaded with food, and even less so that bits of pancakes, pies and bread rested in single file on the knees of the honoured guest, since there was nowhere else to put them. She went on bowing and reiterating:

"Do have another piece, I beg you kindly, please have a piece..."

To which the miller, puffing like a bull, replied:

"Thank you ... you must excuse me ... thank you very much."

"Do have some more," persisted the hostess. "Just a small piece ... you're eating so little... have a small piece, quiet like... "

"Thank you very much," the miller replied again. "I already have a stack of food before me..."

When Fyokla announced for all to hear what she came to tell the village elder, a din so terrible shook the cottage that for a moment it seemed in danger of collapsing; all at once there was a crush in the door, with women shrieking and squealing. Before the hostess could collect her wits, not a guest was left in the house, just the miller alone who, as a result of the hospitality lavished on him, simply could not get up and follow the herd.

"Oh, my sainted aunts! " cried Demyan's wife. "And my husband is not at home ... he must be drinking somewhere... I'll go and fetch him ... what a to-do, heavens above! "

Fyokla did not wait for her to get ready, and ran back home. She was so preoccupied that she did not notice two drunks lying across the road in a puddle, and nearly tripped over them, only just saving herself in time from a headlong flop into the mud. Hearing one of them mutter in the voice of Demyan, she bent over him and, shaking him, tried to pass on the mistress's orders to him; but it was a waste of breath, for Demyan was quite past heeding anything. Clutching his kinsman Stegnei in a bear hug he kept kissing him on the beard and saying: "Sing, Senka, come on, sing! " Stegnei opened his mouth wide in the ugliest manner and emitted a hoarse, grating sound, and that's all the singing there was.

Seeing that she would get no sense from the drunks, Fyokla picked up her skirts and hurried on. The news of the dying stranger had spread through the village like wild fire and people came pouring to the farm yard; Fyokla's cottage was already packed to bursting point. However, none of the people thronging round the poor old man made a move to help him: they stood and stared at him with obtuse, pop-eyed curiosity, and only now and again a low murmur ran through the crowd. The sick old man was lying on the floor as before and seemed to feel a bit better again. Stunned by the noise, he looked in dismay at the crowd

surrounding him. Perhaps a premonition of what was about to happen to him was already dawning on him when Fyokla, tearing her way through and shaking him by the arm, said: "You're feeling a bit better again, aren't you, old fellow? Get up!" everything became clear to him at once. A shudder of fear ran through his body. Still, he did not say a word. Slowly, with a superhuman effort, he dragged himself up to his knees, and his heartrending sigh was his only response to the hubbub that swelled and swelled around him.

"Hold on, old chap, I'll help you to get up," came at long last from a hefty peasant, who stepped forward and put a sturdy arm under the sick man's arms. "Come on, Mitro-kha," he nudged a young lad with an elbow. "Help me, don't stand there gaping!"

Between the two of them they managed to stand the sick man up. The surrounding crowd moved back.

"Listen to me, old fellow," said Fyokla, looking hard into the man's face. "You'd better go on your way from us, we'll see you off, because heaven knows where you came from and ... suppose, God forbid, you go and die, you'll get us all into a lot of trouble ... so, go before you do."

"Very true," cut in a little old woman who stood nearest the front. "Look at yourself, dear soul, real blue about the gills you are, dearie, you might give up the ghost any time."

"That's what I say," remarked the hefty peasant, still holding up the sick man. "Look how his legs are shaking, he's shivering all over too ... you'd better go. You're going to die anyway, so what's it to you, and we'll have the law down on us, you know how it is. Look how your eyes have blurred ... go, old fellow, better go in peace, honestly, go ..."

"Why fuss with him?" a voice called out. "Take him away, that's all, what are you waiting for? D'you want him to die and bring trouble down on all our heads?"

"Wait," screamed Fyokla. "The mistress told me to give him some salve for his chest. Where's your bag? Your bag, where is it?"

"What?"

"Where's your bag?"

"Oh, my bag..."

"Here it is, here!" several voices shouted at once, and

many, many hands held the bag out to Fyokla.

"Wait," Fyokla said again. "The mistress also told me to give him a loaf of white bread and his medicine, now where is that jug? Look, that jug must be standing on the window-sill behind you," she shouted to the women clustered before the window. "Stop jostling, you imps, what's there for you to see, pushing like crazy! Shameless brats! " Saying this, Fyokla hit right and left at the scrambling boys and girls who got under her feet.

"That seems to be all," she said getting the strap of the bag over the sick man's shoulder and sticking his hat on his head. "Well, God bless you, old soul. Be on your way! "

Very slowly the old man raised his bony, thin hands to his head and pulled off his hat; even more slowly now his right hand went up, trembling and faltering, the palm clung for a moment to his forehead, then his chest as he timidly made the sign of the cross.

Fyokla helped him to put on his hat again, and then the hefty peasant, nudging Mitrokha again and, holding up the sick man by the arms, dragged him to the door. With drooping head, the poor beggar silently shuffled along, pursued by the noisy crowd which all but knocked down his escort, who swore at the meddlers for all they were worth. But when they came outside and the pitiless rain started hitting him on the back, when the furious wind picked up the icy tatters of his shirt and started whipping him on his aching chest, the poor old beggar raised his head and his stiffened lips begged for mercy; but his plea went unheard in the savage wail of the wind, and he was dragged on, out of the village.

Soon Komkovo was free of the dying old man and the crowd who had seen him out went back to their revelling. The loud shouting, rollicking songs, talk and bursts of carefree laughter were heard for a long time, until at last the deep of night drove the tipsy villagers home to their warm cottages, to sleep in their beds or on top of the warm stoves. Only the angry wind, rushing over the roofs and the fences, raised its piercing voice in the silence of the night, seconded now and again by the plaintive howling of Snaky who simply could not be chased away from the front porch of the mistress's house.

* * *

Early the next day Sophia Ivanovna said that she must go home. Maria Petrovna begged her to stay if only for one more day, beseeching her most persuasively, but Sophia Ivanovna remained adamant. There was nothing for it, and Palashka was ordered to tell the coachman to harness the brown mare into the carriage. At noon, red-haired Styopka driving in place of Fetiska's father, who was still enfeebled after the drinking of the night before, smartly brought Maria Petrovna's old-fashioned carriage to the front porch, and glanced boastfully at the thronging house servants. When Palashka had tied the promised bag of potatoes to the back of the carriage, Sophia Ivanovna, muffled up from head to toe, got in, supported by the footman Fyodor whose face was covered with bruises from the cold or perhaps something else. Maria Petrovna, who was standing on the porch with the lieutenant's widow, was about to descend to the carriage and kiss her dear friend goodbye when suddenly Demyan, the village elder, materialised from nowhere. There was not a trace of the previous night's drinking on his face: it expressed only a burden of cares.

"What is it, Demyan?" Maria Petrovna asked.

"I've come to tell you, Maria Petrovna, if it's your pleasure to hear me out," he replied with a bow. "Yesterday a sick man came here, and you ordered to have him sent off... Well, thank God, we got rid of him, madam, otherwise he'd have landed us in plenty of trouble."

"What happened?" the mistress asked fretfully.

"Just this, Maria Petrovna, madam. A man came from Oreshkovo to the flour mill and said that at dawn today that old man was found dead in the ditch... Their lads, he said, went to get some stakes and there he was, madam, lying in the ditch right beside the balk... not looking dead at all... his bag and hat beside him, the man from Oreshkovo said. The police arrived, he said, and started brewing a pot of trouble."

Sophia Ivanovna flung up her hands and bounced on her seat; Maria Petrovna shed a tear and raised her eye heavenward; only the lieutenant's widow heard the man out with her usual coolness.

"Holy Mother of God, Saint Sergius! " moaned Maria Petrovna, recovering the power of speech.

Her head shook more rapidly than ever, and warm tears of gratitude poured down her desiccated cheeks.

"There you are! You're thanking the Lord now, and yesterday, remember?" said Sophia Ivanovna, gesticulating triumphantly. "You didn't want to listen to me ... and didn't I warn you? And you wanted to let him stay ... Oh well, thank heaven this business has ended so well for you, I'm very glad, very glad ... goodbye, Maria Petrovna dear, thank you for your hospitality, come and visit us in our Zakuryaevvo soon to tell us our fortunes. Goodbye! "

And the carriage rolled off, carrying away the mistress of Zakuryaevvo, a goodly bag of potatoes and a whole cart-load of news which Sophia Ivanovna could not wait to pass on to her other benefactress to whose estate she immediately told the red-haired Styopka to take her.

1847

Translated by Olga Shartse

IVAN TURGENEV

(1818–1863)

Ivan Turgenev was an outstanding writer of his century and one of the most prominent exponents of the realistic trend in art. His cycle of short stories about the life of Russian serfs "The Hunter's Sketches" is widely known, as are his novels "Rudin" (1856), "On the Eve" (1860) and "Fathers and Sons" (1862) in which the hero, for the first time in Russian literature, was an intellectual who did not belong to the gentry.

The story included in this volume is Turgenev's "Faust". The theme was traditional in European and Russian literature. Turgenev had once written an article about the Russian translation of Goethe's "Faust" and had himself translated excerpts from it. It was in fact Goethe's "Faust" which helped Vera, the heroine of Turgenev's story, to realise how incomplete was her life and to try and exercise her right to happiness. However, it was not to be, and her attempt ended in tragedy. Literary critic Victor Zhirmunsky wrote: "In the story the reading of Goethe's 'Faust' plays a decisive role in the spiritual awakening of the heroine, in her attempt to achieve moral emancipation, and the subsequent catastrophe. The epigraph from Goethe stresses the element of pessimism and renouncement of love, inherent in Turgenev's work."

The prototype of Vera is believed to be Maria, the sister of Lev Tolstoy, whom Turgenev met in the autumn of 1854. In a letter to his friend Pavel Annenkov, a critic and journalist, Turgenev wrote: "His sister is one of the most attractive creatures I have ever had the fortune to meet. She is sweet, intelligent and unaffected—I could look at her forever. I almost fell in love with her in my old age (I was 36 four days ago), and I must confess that I have been smitten to the heart."

Ilya, a son of Lev Tolstoy, writes in his memoirs: "It is said that at one time Turgenev was in love with Maria Nikolayevna. It is also said that he described her in his "Faust". It was a knightly tribute to her purity of heart and her ingenuousness."

The state of mind of the story's hero on returning to his family estate after a long absence, his loneliness, his being at a loose end and falling in love with a married woman, might have been experienced by the author himself.

In June 1856 he wrote: "I no longer expect happiness for myself, I mean happiness in that exciting sense in which young hearts take it. There is no point in thinking of flowers when blossomtime has passed. I must learn submission from Nature, and follow its correct and unruffled course..."

FAUST*

A story in nine letters

*Entbehren sollst du, sollst entbehren.**

(Faust, Part I, verse 1549)

LETTER ONE

From Pavel Alexandrovich B., to Semyon Nikolayevich V.

June 6th, 1850.

I arrived here four days ago and, as promised, I am taking up my pen, dear friend, to write to you. A thin rain has been falling since early morning; it's impossible outside, and besides I want to have a chat with you. Here I am back again in my old nest where I have not been—I dread to say it!—for nine whole years! There's been so much of everything these last nine years. Honestly, come to think of it, I seem to have become a different person. And I really am different; remember my great-grandmother's small, dim mirror with the funny curlicues on the corners which hangs in our drawing-room, and your wondering what it had seen a hundred years ago, well, the moment I arrived I went up to that mirror and in spite of myself I was perplexed. I suddenly saw how I have aged and changed. However, not I alone have aged. My poor old house which has long been decrepit is all but tottering now, it has gone all lopsided and sunken into the ground. My good old Vasilyevna, our housekeeper (I'm sure you have not forgotten her: she used to treat you to lovely jam), has become quite shrivelled up and stooped. When she saw me, she clucked and gasped so excitedly that she started coughing, collapsed on to a chair and waved her hand helplessly. Old Terentil tries not to give in, he still holds himself erect and when he walks he turns out the toes of his feet shod in the same creaky goat-hide boots with the high instep and bows which you found so touching, and wearing the same old yellow nankeen trousers... But, heavens! how these pantaloons flap round his skinny legs! How white his hair

* English translation ©Progress Publishers 1982

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** *Renounce, you must renounce (desires)!* —German.

has grown, and how his face has shrunk! And when he spoke to me and then when I heard him ordering the servants about in the room next door, I wanted to laugh and at the same time I felt sorry for him: he has lost all his teeth and lips and hisses. Now the garden, I must say, has done wonderfully well: those modest shrubs of lilac, acacia and honeysuckle (we planted them together, remember?) have grown into thick, magnificent shrubs; the birches and maples, they've all grown tall and spread wide; the lime walks are especially fine. I love these walks, I love the soft greyish-green colour and the delicate fragrance under their vaults. I love the pattern of light spots dappling the dark earth—I have no sand, as you may well know. My favourite oak sapling is now a sturdy young tree. Yesterday, in the middle of the day I sat for more than an hour on a bench in its shade. It was lovely. The grass all round me was such a jolly green; the golden sunlight, a strong yet gentle light, lay upon everything, and even stole into the shade... And the birds to be heard! You have not forgotten, I hope, that birds are a passion with me. The turtle-doves cooed ceaselessly, an oriole whistled now and again, a finch was doing its sweetly intricate piece, the blackbirds chattered angrily, a cuckoo called in the distance, and suddenly a woodpecker screamed so piercingly as if it had gone mad. I sat and listened and listened to these sounds merging together into a harmonious hum, and I did not feel like making a move, I felt deliciously lazy or, perhaps, sentimentally maudlin. And it is not only the garden that has grown: there seem to be a number of big, stalwart chaps about in whom for the life of me I can't recognise the little boys I used to know. And Timosha, your favourite, has grown into a Timofei of a size you could never have imagined. You were worried about his health and predicted consumption. You should see his huge red hands protruding from the too-short sleeves of his nankeen jacket, and the solid, rounded muscles bulging all over him! He has a neck like a bull, his head is covered with tight flaxen curls—a perfect Farnese Hercules! His face has not changed as much as the other boys' faces, it has not even broadened, and he still has the same gay smile, a “yawning” smile as you called it. I've taken him on as my valet; my Petersburgian one I

left behind in Moscow because he was too fond of putting me to shame with his superior knowledge of society ways. Of my dogs there is not a one, they have all died. Only Nefka lived long, but she, too, had not waited for me, not like Argos for Ulysses. She did not live to see with her dimmed eyes her old master and hunting partner. Shavka is still going strong, his bark is as rheumy as ever, there's the old tear in his ear, and his tail is full of prickles as it should be. I am living in your old room. To be sure, the sun blazes into it and there are lots of flies, but then the musty old-house smell is not as bad here as in the other rooms. Funny thing, this musty, sourish, insipid smell has a powerful effect on my imagination; I cannot say that the smell is unpleasant, rather the contrary, but it evokes a sadness in me and then a despondency. Like you I am very fond of old pot-bellied chests of drawers, bow-legged armchairs with oval backs that belong to another day, fly-specked glass chandeliers with a large egg made from mauve foil in the centre, in short, old furniture in general, but I cannot bear its constant presence, seeing it all the time fills me with a nervous ennui (that's precisely what it is!). In the room where I've decided to live the furniture is most ordinary, home-made stuff; however, I've kept the tall, narrow cabinet in the corner with the old-fashioned blue and green glass bowls and goblets and things ranged on the shelves and barely visible through the dusty panes. Remember that woman's portrait in a black frame which you called a portrait of Manon Lescaut, well, I've ordered it to be hung on the wall in my room. It has grown somewhat darker in these nine years, but the eyes have kept their pensive, knowing, tender look, the lips smile as flippantly and sadly as ever, and the half-plucked rose is falling as slowly from her thin fingers. The curtains in my room are very amusing. They were green originally but have turned yellow from the sun, and printed on them in black are scenes from d'Arlincourt's *Hermit*. On one curtain this hermit with an enormous beard, bulging eyes, and wearing sandals is enticing a dishevelled young Miss into the mountains; on the other, four knights in berets and puffed sleeves are engaged in a furious combat, one of them is lying *enraccourci*, obviously killed, in short, all the horrors are shown in these scenes,

while all round there's perfect peace and quiet, and the curtains themselves shimmer so meekly... Since I have settled here I've succumbed to emotional calm: I don't want to do anything, I don't want to see anyone, I have nothing to dream about, and I'm too lazy to meditate. I am not too lazy to think, however: these are two different things, as you very well know. At first, I was overwhelmed by childhood memories ... wherever I went, whatever I looked at, they rose at once so vividly, in such minute detail, and remained motionless, as it were, clear-cut and definite. These memories were superseded by others, and then ... and then I quietly turned away from the past, and all I was left with was a somnolent sort of burden in my heart. Can you imagine it, sitting on the dam under a willow I suddenly burst into tears and in spite of my well-advanced age I would have wept for a long time if I had not felt ashamed of a passing peasant woman who gave me a curious look and then, without turning her face to me, made a stiff, low bow, and continued on her way. I should very much like to stay in this mood (I am not going to cry any more, of course) until I leave here, that is until September, and I should be very sorry if one of my neighbours decided to pay me a call. However, there seems no danger of that; after all I have no close neighbours, you know. You will understand me, I'm sure; you know from your own experience how beneficial privacy can be... I need it now after all my wanderings.

I shan't be bored. I've brought several books along, and I have a decent library here. Yesterday, I opened all the book-cases and rummaged for hours among the mouldy volumes. I discovered many curious things I had overlooked before: *Candide* in a handwritten translation made in the 70s, newspapers and journals of that same time, *The Triumphant Chameleon* (that is, Mirabeau)*, *Le Paysan perversi***, etc. I happened upon some children's books, my own, my father's, my grandmother's, and even my great-grandmother's, fancy that! There is a very, very old French

* *The Triumphant Chameleon or a Representation of Anecdotes and Traits of Count Mirabeau*, an anonymous pamphlet, translated from the German in 1792.

** *Le Paysan perversi*, an autobiographical novel by de la Breton (1734-1805), a French writer.

grammar with a motley cloth binding and these words written on it in large letters: *Ce livre appartient à m-lle Eudoxie de Lavrine*, and the year—1741. I saw books I had once brought from abroad, among them Goethe's *Faust*. You may not know this, but there was a time when I knew *Faust* by heart (the first part, of course) word for word, I could not read my fill of it... But other times, other dreams, and I hardly think I opened Goethe once in the course of these last nine years. I can't put in words what I felt when I saw the little book I knew so well (in a poor 1828 edition). I took it away with me, lay down on my bed and began to read. What an impact the whole of that magnificent first scene had on me! The appearance of the Spirit of the Earth and his words, remember: "On the ocean of life, in the whirl of creation..." thrilled and chilled me with a rapture I had not experienced for a long time. I remembered everything: Berlin, my student days, Fraulein Klara Stich*, Seidelmann** in the part of Mephistopheles, Radziwill's music***, and everything, everything else... I could not fall asleep for a long time; my youth came and stood there before me like a ghost. A fire ran along my veins, a poison, my heart became distended and refused to contract, something tore at the chords, and desires seethed...

Such are the daydreams your friend, who's nearly forty, indulged in sitting alone in his lonely little house! What if someone could have caught me out? What matter? I wouldn't have felt a bit ashamed. Feeling ashamed is another sign of youth. Do you know how I began to notice that I was growing old? This is how. Nowadays I try to make more of my happy sensations and less of the sad ones, whereas in my young days I did the very opposite. In those days I'd fuss over any sorrow I had as if it were a treasure, yet I'd be ashamed of a happy impulse...

Still, I believe that in spite of my whole life experience there is yet something in the world which, friend Horatio, I have not experienced, and that this "something" is, per-

* Klara Stich (1820-1862), a popular German dramatic actress.

** Karl Seidelmann (1793-1846), an actor whom contemporaries called Germany's leading tragedian.

*** Antoni Radziwill (1775-1883), a Polish composer.

haps the most important thing of all.

Heavens, what I've babbled myself into! Goodbye. Till next time. What are you doing with yourself in Petersburg? By the way, Savely my village chef has asked me to convey his respects to you. He, too, has aged but not too much, he's grown somewhat fat and flabby, it is true. He is as good as ever at making chicken soup with boiled onions, cheese cakes with a fancy trimming, and pigus—the famous steppeland dish after which your tongue turned white and rigid for a whole day. But then the roast he still roasts until it's dry like cardboard, you can bang on the plate with it. However, goodbye for now.

Yours, P. B.

LETTER TWO

From P. B. to S. V.

June 12th, 1850

I have some rather important news to tell you, dear friend. Listen then. Yesterday, I felt like taking a walk before dinner, only not in the garden; and so I went down the road that goes to town. A quick walk down a long, straight road is very pleasant. Although the walk is quite aimless, you feel as if you're doing something, hurrying somewhere. I saw a carriage coming from the opposite direction, and my heart sank at the thought that it was someone calling on me. No, the gentlemen with the fine whiskers sitting in the carriage was someone I did not know. I stopped worrying, when suddenly this gentleman, on coming abreast of me, told his coachman to stop, raised his cap politely and even more politely asked me if I was so and so, calling me by name. I also stopped, and with the ebullience of an accused facing interrogation replied: I'm so and so, meanwhile staring stupidly at the gentleman with the fine whiskers and thinking: "I'm sure I've seen him somewhere before."

"You don't recognise me?" he asked, climbing out of the carriage.

"I'm afraid I don't."

"And I knew you at once."

Well, one thing led to another, and do you know who he turned out to be? Priimkov, our university comrade, remember? "Now, where is his rather important news?" I can imagine you thinking at this moment, my dear Semyon Nikolayevich. "Priimkov, from what I remember of him, was a rather feather-brained chap, although there was no harm in him, and he was not stupid." You're quite right, my good old friend, but let me tell you the rest of the conversation.

"I was delighted," he said, "when I heard that you had come back home to be our neighbour. And not I alone was delighted, by the way."

"Could I know who else was so kind?" I asked.

"My wife."

"Your wife! "

"Yes, my wife, she's an old friend of yours."

"And your wife's name?"

"It's Vera Nikolayevna, nee Yeltsova..."

"Vera Nikolayevna! " I exclaimed involuntarily.

And that is the rather important news I promised to tell you at the beginning of my letter.

It may well be that you see nothing important in this... I shall have to tell you something of my past, my long-past life.

When you and I finished the university in 183... I was twenty three years old. You went into the civil service and I, as you know, decided to go to Berlin. However, there was no sense in going to Berlin before October. I wanted to spend the summer in Russia, in the country, to really wallow in laziness for the last time, and after that get down to work in earnest. There is no need to dwell now on how far I carried this latter resolve... "But where shall I spend the summer?" I asked myself. I did not feel like coming here: my father had died a short time before, I had no close relatives, I was afraid I'd be lonely and bored... And so I gladly accepted the invitation of my uncle, a cousin of my mother, to his country estate in T... gubernia. He was a man of ample means with a kind heart and a simple manner; he lived like a lord of the manor, and his mansion was really lordly. And so I went there for the summer. My uncle had a large family: two sons and five daughters. Besides the immediate family he had no end of people living in his house. Guests were always arriving, but still it wasn't really

gay. The days passed noisily and there was no hope of privacy. Everything was done by everyone together, everyone tried to find some diversion, to think of something amusing to do, and by the end of the day everyone was terribly tired. It was a trite sort of life. I was already beginning to dream of the day I would leave, I was only waiting for Uncle's nameday to come and be over with, but at the ball at his nameday I met Vera Nikolayevna Yeltsova—and stayed.

She was sixteen then. She lived with her mother on their small estate, a distance of five versts or so from my uncle's place. Her father—quite a remarkable person, people said—quickly rose to the rank of colonel and would have gone up further, but he died young, accidentally shot by his friend during hunting. Vera Nikolayevna was only a child then. Her mother was also an extraordinary woman: she spoke several foreign languages, and knew a lot. She was seven or eight years older than her husband, it was a love match, an elopement actually. Losing him was almost more than she could bear, and till the day she died (Priimkov says she died soon after her daughter married him) she wore severe mourning. I vividly remember her face, an expressive, dark face with large, stern and sort of dimmed eyes, a thin, straight nose, and thick, greying hair. Her father—his name was Ladanov—had lived in Italy for about fifteen years. The daughter was born to him by a simple peasant girl from Albano who was murdered the next day by her fiancé, a Trastevere chap, from whom Ladanov had stolen her... At the time, the story caused a sensation. After he returned to Russia, Ladanov never left his study, let alone the house, devoting himself to chemistry, anatomy and cabalism. He wanted to prolong human life and imagined that it was possible to make contact with spirits and call forth the dead... The neighbours thought him a sorcerer. He was extremely fond of his daughter, teaching her everything himself, but he never forgave her for eloping with Yeltsov and banished her and her husband from his sight forever. He prophesied a sad life for both of them and died in solitude. Left a widow, Mme Yeltsova dedicated all her time to the upbringing of her daughter, and received hardly anyone at all. Vera Nikolayevna, when I first met her, had never yet been in a single

town, not even an uyezd town, can you imagine it?

She was not like our ordinary Russian misses: an imprint of something peculiar lay upon her. From the first I was struck by the amazing composure with which she moved and spoke. She did not seem to fuss or worry about anything, she answered simply and intelligently, and listened attentively. The expression of her face was candid and truthful like a child's; true, it was somewhat cold and unvarying, but not pensive. She was seldom gay, and then not like the other girls: sweeter than any show of gaiety was the way her whole being lit up with the radiance of her innocent soul. She was smallish, very well made, if a bit on the thin side, her features were regular and delicate, she had a splendid brow, fair hair with golden glints in it, a straight nose like her mother's, rather full lips, and grey going-on-black eyes that looked somehow too directly from under her fluffy, curling eyelashes. Her hands were small but not very pretty: people with talent do not have such hands, and indeed there were no special talents attributed to Vera Nikolayevna. Her voice rang like a seven-year-old girl's. At my uncle's ball I was presented to her mother, and a few days later made my first call on them.

Mme Yeltsova was a very strange woman, strong-willed and gravely preoccupied most of the time. I quite fell under her influence, and both respected and feared her.

She had a system for everything, and brought up her daughter also according to a system, but did not restrict her freedom. Vera loved her and trusted her blindly. She only had to give Vera a book and tell her: this page here do not read—and she would never so much as peep at the forbidden page, she would sooner miss the one before it. But then Mme Yeltsova had her *idées fixes*, her own foibles. For instance, she was afraid of everything that might excite the imagination, and so her daughter reached the age of seventeen without reading a single story, a single poem, and yet in geography, history and even natural history she often nonplussed me, a candidate of science, and not one of the dunces, as you will perhaps recall. I once tried to talk to Mme Yeltsova about her *idée fixe*, but she was so taciturn that it was difficult to draw her out. All she did was nod her head slowly.

"You are saying," she spoke at last, "that it is *both* useful and pleasant to read poetic works. I think that one should make one's choice in life in good time: *either* useful or pleasant, and keep to that resolve once and for all. Once upon a time, I, too, wanted to combine the two... It cannot be done, it leads to ruin or shoddiness."

Indeed, she was an amazing woman, honest and proud, something of a fanatic, and superstitious, too, in her own way. "I am afraid of life," she once told me. And she really was afraid of life, she was afraid of those secret forces on which life is built and which may suddenly break through. Woe to him on whom they vent their wrath! Those forces had shown Yeltsova how devastating they could be: remember how her mother died, her husband, and her father... Anyone would be frightened. I don't think I ever saw her smile. It was as if she had locked herself in and thrown the key into the lake. She had obviously known much grief in her life and never shared it with anyone, keeping it all bottled up inside her. She had trained herself so well not to give vent to her feelings that she was even ashamed of showing how passionately she loved her daughter; she never once kissed her in my presence, never used any endearments, and always addressed her as just Vera. I remember what she told me once... I said to her that all of us, modern people, were running a slight crack, as it were, and she replied: "You should not let the crack spread. Either break your whole character, or leave it alone."

Yeltsova had very few callers, but I visited her often. In my heart of hearts I knew that she felt well disposed towards me, and as for Vera Nikolayevna, I liked her very much. We had long talks, and walks... Her mother was never in the way, but then Vera herself did not like to be without her mother's company and I, for my part, felt no need for a tête-à-tête. Vera Nikolayevna had a peculiar habit of thinking aloud; even in sleep she talked in a loud, clear voice of whatever had impressed her during the day. Once, looking at me attentively and propping up her cheek with a hand, as was her habit, she said: "I believe that Mr. B. is a good person, but he can't be relied upon." Our relations were most friendly and placid; only once I thought I detected something strange in the very depths of her clear eyes, a

soft tenderness. But maybe I was mistaken.

Meanwhile, it was time I started thinking of my departure. But I kept putting it off. The very thought that soon I would no longer be able to see this sweet girl to whom I had become so attached sent a chill of fear through me. Berlin was beginning to lose its attraction. I did not dare to admit to myself what was happening to me, for it was as if whirls of mist were wandering in my soul. And then, one morning, the mist lifted. "What more need I seek?" I asked myself. "Strive for what? For the truth? But it's elusive, you can't pin it down. Hadn't I better stay here and get married?" And, fancy this, the thought of marriage did not frighten me at all at the time. On the contrary, I welcomed it. What's more, I announced my intentions that very day, only not to Vera Nikolayevna, as might have been expected, but to Yeltsova herself. She gave me a long look, and then said;

"No, my dear, go to Berlin, and run a few more cracks. You are kind, but you are not the husband for Vera."

I went red and dropped my eyes and, what will probably really surprise you, at heart I agreed with her instantly. A week later I left, and I never saw Yeltsova or Vera Nikolayevna again.

I have described my adventures to you in brief because I know how you hate diffuse accounts. Once in Berlin I very soon forgot Vera Nikolayevna. But I must confess that this unexpected news of her excited me. The thought that she was near, that she was my neighbour, that I would see her in a few days' time rather smote me. The past rose before me suddenly, and advanced upon me, as it were. Priimkov told me that he was paying me this call with a view to renewing our old acquaintance, and that he hoped I'd visit them soon. He also told me that he had served in the cavalry, had retired with the rank of lieutenant and bought an estate eight versts away from mine, intending to become a country squire. He and his wife had three children, but two of them died, and all they had left was their five-year-old daughter.

"Does your wife really remember me?" I asked.

"She does," he replied somewhat hesitantly. "Of course, she was little more than a child then, but her mother always spoke very well of you and you know how she abides by every opinion ever voiced by her dear deceased."

I remembered Mme Yeltsova telling me that I was not the husband for Vera, and thought, watching Priimkov out of the corner of my eye: "And you were." He stayed a few hours. He is a very good, lovable chap, he speaks so modestly and has such a good-natured look that one cannot help liking him... true, his mental faculties have not developed since we first knew him. I shall certainly return the call, no later than tomorrow, perhaps, I am very curious to see what Vera Nikolayevna has grown into.

You are probably laughing at me, you beast, ensconced in the director's chair, but I shall write you anyway about my impressions of her. Goodbye, till my next letter.

Yours, P. B.

LETTER THREE

From P. B. to S. V.

June 16th, 1850.

Well, brother mine, I have called and I have seen her. First of all, I have to tell you an extraordinary thing: believe it or not, as you wish, but she has hardly changed at all, in face and in figure. When she came out to greet me I almost gasped: this was a girl of seventeen, no more! Only her eyes are not a young girl's, but they never were, as a matter of fact, they were too serene. There was the same composure, the same clear-eyed look, the same voice, and not a wrinkle on her brow, it's as if she has been kept in snow somewhere all these years. And, mind you, she's twenty-eight now and she had three children. It's incredible! And please do not think I am exaggerating because I'm partial; I did not like this "changelessness" of hers at all.

A woman of twenty-eight, a wife and mother, ought not to look like a young girl; after all, she hadn't lived for nothing. She was very amiable, while Priimkov himself was frankly delighted that I came. This good soul is simply dying to become attached to someone. Their house is very cosy and neat. Vera Nikolayevna was dressed like a young girl too: all in white with a blue sash and a thin gold chain round her neck. Her daughter is very pretty and not like her at all, more like her grandmother. A portrait of this strange

woman, a remarkably good likeness, hangs on the wall above the sofa in the drawing room. It struck me the moment I walked in. She seemed to be looking at me sternly and intently. We sat down, talked about old times, and little by little the conversation got going. I could not help glancing at Yeltsova's sombre portrait all the time because Vera Nikolayevna was sitting exactly under it: it's her favourite place. Now, picture my amazement: Vera Nikolayevna has not read a single novel, until now, not a single poem, not a line of anything that has been made up, as she put it. Such unbelievable indifference to the loftiest pleasures of the mind angered me. It was quite unforgivable in an intelligent woman with fine sensitivities, which I judged her to have.

"Have you made it a rule never to read such books?" I asked her.

"I just didn't read them," she replied. "I had no time."

"No time! Amazing. Why don't you try and give your wife a taste for reading?" I turned to Priimkov.

"I'd be delighted..." Priimkov began, but Vera Nikolayevna cut him short.

"Don't pretend. You're not very keen on poetry yourself."

"Not on poetry, perhaps, but novels, for instance..."

"But what do you do with yourselves, what do you do in the evenings?" I asked. "You play cards, I suppose?"

"We do sometimes," she replied. "One always finds something to do. We read, too, there are good books besides poetry."

"Why are you so set against poetry?"

"I'm not set against it, but since childhood I have been accustomed not to read anything fictitious. Mama wished it so, and the longer I live the more I become convinced that everything Mama did, everything she said was the truth, the holy truth."

"Ah well, have it your way, but I cannot agree with you: to my mind, you are needlessly denying yourself the purest of pleasures, and the most legitimate. After all, you do not reject music or painting, why do you reject poetry then?"

"I do not reject it, I am not acquainted with it, that's all."

"Then I'll see that you are! It wasn't for life that your mother forbade you to read elegant literature, was it?"

"No, Mama released me of all her forbiddances when I became married. It simply never occurred to me to read ... what did you call it? Well, anyway, to read novels."

I listened to her in dismay. What she said was quite unexpected.

She regarded me with her calm look. Birds look like that when they are not afraid.

"I'll bring you a book!" I promised eagerly. (The thought of *Faust* which I had just read flashed across my mind.)

Vera Nikolayevna gave a small sigh.

"It isn't ... it isn't going to be Georges Sand, is it?" she asked timorously.

"Aha, so you have heard about her, have you? What if it is Georges Sand, what matter? No, I'll bring you a book by another author. You haven't forgotten your German, I'm sure?"

"No, I haven't."

"She speaks it like a German," Priimkov confirmed eagerly.

"Splendid, then. I shall bring you ... you shall see for yourself what an amazing poem I shall bring you."

"I'll see when you do. And now, let's go into the garden, Natasha can hardly sit still any longer."

She put on a round-brimmed, little girl's straw hat, a copy of the one put on by her daughter, only a little larger, and we went into the garden. I walked beside her. Her face looked even sweeter in the fresh air, in the shade of the tall lime trees, especially when she turned slightly and threw her head back a little to look at me from under the brim of her hat. If it were not for Priimkov walking behind us, if it were not for Natasha skipping in front of us, I would honestly believe that I was not thirty-five but twenty-three, and that I was only about to go to Berlin, all the more so because the garden we were in was very much like their garden. I simply had to share my impression with Vera Nikolayevna.

"Everyone tells me that outwardly I have hardly changed," she said. "However, inwardly too I'm still the same."

We came up to a small Chinese summer-house.

"We did not have a house like this at home in Osinovka," she said. "Do not mind that it's crumbling and peeling, it's very nice and cool inside."

We went into the little house. I looked about me.

"Do you know what, Vera Nikolayevna," I said. "Next time I come, have a table and a few chairs brought in. It's really wonderful here. It's here I shall read Goethe's *Faust* to you... That is what I am going to read to you."

"Indeed, there are no flies here," she remarked in her simplicity. "And when will you come next time?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Very good," she said. "I'll tell the servants."

Natasha who had come into the little house with us suddenly sprang back with a cry.

"What is it?" Vera Nikolayevna asked.

"Oh, mummy, look what a horrid spider!" the girl said, pointing into a corner.

Vera Nikolayevna looked and saw a large speckled spider slowly climbing up the wall.

"What's there to be afraid of?" she asked. "It doesn't bite, look."

And before I could stop her, she took the ugly insect off the wall, let it run around on the palm of her hand, and then flung it away.

"Heavens, how brave you are!" I exclaimed.

"This does not take bravery. It's not a poisonous spider."

"You're as strong as ever in natural history, it seems. I'd be afraid to touch it."

"What's there to be afraid of?" she repeated.

Natasha looked at the two of us in silence, and smiled.

"How like your mother she is!" I said.

"She is, and I'm so glad," Vera Nikolayevna said with a pleased smile. "God willing she'll be like her not just in face alone."

Dinner was announced, and after dinner I left. NB. The dinner was delicious—I'm mentioning this in parenthesis for you, the glutton! I'm taking *Faust* there tomorrow. I have my fears that old Goethe and I might be a flop. I'll write and tell you how it went.

Well now, what do you think of all these "happenings"? I expect you imagine that she has made a powerful impres-

sion on me, that I am about to fall in love, and so on and so forth? No, brother, no. There's time for everything. I've sown my wild oats—enough! One doesn't begin life anew at my age. Besides, I never went in for that type of woman. However, what was the type of woman I did go in for?

*I shudder—and my heart is pained—
Of my old idols I'm ashamed... **

In any case, I am glad we are neighbours, I am glad that I can be with this intelligent, simple, pure creature; what happens next you'll hear of in due course.

Yours, P. B.

LETTER FOUR

From P. B. to S. V.

June 20th, 1850.

The reading took place yesterday, my good friend, and exactly how it went I'll tell you point by point. But before everything else I can't wait to tell you that the success was startling; however, "success" is not the right word... Anyway, listen. I arrived for dinner. There were six of us at the table: Vera, Priimkov, their daughter, her governess (a nondescript little white figure), myself, and an old German in a short brown coat, a freshly washed, freshly shaved gentleman, a little the worse for wear, with a very meek and honest face, a toothless smile, and a lingering smell of chicory coffee—all old German men smell like that. We were introduced: his name is Schimmel, he is the German tutor of the Priimkovs' neighbours, the Princes X. Vera Nikolayevna invited him to attend the reading, she seems to like the old chap. We had dinner late and stayed at the table for a long time, after which we went for a walk. The weather was wonderful. In the morning there was rain and wind, but the late afternoon was lovely. She and I came out into an open glade. Right overhead a large pink cloud hung suspended high up in the sky; grey streaks trailed from it like smoke; a

* Lines from Pushkin's poem "Conversation Between a Bookseller and a Poet" (1824).

tiny star shimmered on the very edge of the cloud, now peeping out, now hiding behind it again, and a little distance away the white crescent moon could be seen against the blue that was already taking on a crimson hue. I drew Vera Nikolayevna's attention to this cloud.

"Yes, it's beautiful," she said, "but look over there."

I turned round to look. A huge dark-blue cloud was spreading over the setting sun; it had the look of a fire-breathing mountain. The cloud was edged with an ominous red glow, and in one place, in the very middle, the glow broke through the heavy mass, bursting forth from the red-hot crater...

"It bodes a thunderstorm," Priimkov remarked.

But I am drifting away from the main thing. In my last letter I forgot to tell you that when I came home from the Priimkovs' I regretted my impulsive promise of *Faust*. Schiller would do much better for a first reading, if a German it was to be. What I was afraid of especially were the first scenes before his meeting Gretchen; and I was not certain about Mephistopheles either. But I was under the influence of *Faust* and my heart was not in reading anything else. When it grew quite dark we went into the Chinese house which had been put in order the day before. Facing the door and placed in front of a small settee stood a round table, covered with a plush cloth; there were armchairs and ordinary chairs set round it and a lamp had been lit. I sat down on the settee and took out my book. Vera Nikolayevna sat down in an armchair near the door. In the darkness, outside the door, the light of the lamp picked out a green acacia branch, and it swung slightly in the gentle breeze. Now and then a current of the nocturnal air poured in from outside. Priimkov sat down near me at the table, and the German took the chair close to him. The governess had remained in the house with Natasha. I made a short introductory speech; I told them about the ancient legend of Doctor Faust, about the significance of Mephistopheles, about Goethe himself, and asked them to stop me if there was something they did not understand. Then I cleared my throat... Priimkov asked me if, perhaps, I wanted some sugar water, and was obviously very pleased with himself for thinking of asking me that. I declined the offer. A profound

silence settled on the gathering... I began to read, I did not raise my eyes, I felt self-conscious, my heart was beating fast, and my voice shook. The first exclamation of approval came from the German, and throughout the reading he alone broke the silence with an occasional: "Amazing! " "Sublime! " "Now that is truly profound! " Priimkov, I noticed, was bored: he could not really follow the German, and besides he did not care for poetry, by his own admission. Ah well, that was his own headache. I wanted to give him a hint that the reading could go on without him, but thought better of it. Vera Nikolayevna did not so much as stir. I stole a glance at her: eyes were fixed straight at me, and her face seemed to have paled. After Faust's first meeting with Gretchen, she sat forward in her armchair, folded her hands and remained in that attitude until the end. I could feel how sick and tired Priimkov was, and at first it put me off somewhat, but little by little I forgot about him and got carried away... I was reading for Vera Nikolayevna alone, and an inner voice told me that she was fascinated by the poem. When I finished (I left out the intermezzo, which in manner already belongs to the second part, and also omitted bits from "Nights on the Bröcken"), when I uttered that last "Heinrich! " the German whispered rapturously: "My God, how beautiful! " while Priimkov sprang to his feet (so gladly, poor chap!) and started thanking me for the great pleasure I had given them. But I did not reply to him, I was watching Vera Nikolayevna, I was waiting to hear what she would say. She got up, walked to the door with hesitant steps, stopped there for a minute, and then went quietly down into the garden. I rushed out after her. She had already gone some way, her dress making a white blur in the thick shadows.

"Didn't you like it?" I called out.

She stopped.

"Could you let me have that book?" she asked.

"I'll give it to you, Vera Nikolayevna, if you want it."

"Thank you," she said, and disappeared.

Priimkov and the German came up to me.

"Isn't it amazingly warm! " said Priimkov. "Stuffy, even. But where could my wife have gone?"

"Home. I believe," I replied.

"I think it's almost time for supper," Priimkov said, and then added: "Your reading is excellent! "

"Vera Nikolayevna liked *Faust*, I believe," I said.

"No doubt of it! " Priimkov exclaimed, and Schimmel seconded him: "Oh, of course! "

We entered the house.

"Where's the mistress?" Priimkov asked the parlourmaid who was crossing the hall.

"The mistress has gone to her bedroom."

Priimkov went up there, while I followed Schimmel out to the terrace.

The old man raised his eyes skyward, took a pinch of snuff and said thoughtfully: "So many stars! And each one is a world." He took another pinch of snuff.

I did not think any reply was called for, and I merely glanced upwards in silent agreement. My secret bewilderment weighed heavily on my spirit... The stars seemed to be looking down gravely upon us. Priimkov appeared some five minutes later and asked us into the dining-room. Vera Nikolayevna came in now, and we sat down to supper.

"Look at Vera, will you," Priimkov said to me. "What? Haven't you noticed anything?"

I did notice a change in her face but without knowing why I replied:

"No, nothing."

"But her eyes are red," Priimkov persisted.

I made no comment.

"Can you imagine it, I came upstairs and found her in tears. It's something that hasn't happened to her for a long time. I can tell exactly when she cried the last time, it was when our Sasha died. See what you and your *Faust* have done?" he added with a smile.

"Doesn't it mean, Vera Nikolayevna," I said, "that you have now seen for yourself that I was right when I..."

"I couldn't have expected it," she broke in, "but there's no knowing yet whether you're right or not. Maybe Mama forbade me to read such books because she knew..."

"Knew what?" I asked. "Go on."

"What for? I'm ashamed enough as it is for weeping—over what? However, you and I will have a talk about this later. There is much that I did not quite understand."

"But why didn't you stop me?"

"I did understand all the words and their meaning, but..."

She let the sentence trail, and sank in thought. At that very moment a sudden gust of wind rushed noisily through the trees in the garden tousling the leaves. Vera Nikolayevna started, and turned to face the open window.

"I told you there was going to be a thunderstorm!" Priimkov cried. "Why, dearest, why do you tremble so?"

She gave him a silent look. A faint, distant flash of lightning was mysteriously reflected in her immobile face.

"It's all *Faust's* doing," Priimkov continued. "After supper you must go straight to bed ... am I right, Herr Schimmel?"

"After a moral pleasure a physical rest is as beneficial as it is welcome," replied the kind old chap, and drank a glass of vodka.

Once supper was over we did not linger. As I said good-night to Vera Nikolayevna, she gave me her hand: it was cold. I went to the room allotted me and stood for a long time before the window, instead of undressing and going to bed. Priimkov's prophecy had come true: the thunderstorm had broken out. I heard the noise of the wind, the drumming and splashing of the rain, at every flash of lightning I saw the church on the shore of the lake not far away silhouetted now in black against a white background, now standing out whitely against a black background, or then again being swallowed up by the darkness... But my thoughts were far away. I was thinking about Vera Nikolayevna, I was wondering what she would tell me when she had read *Faust* herself, I was thinking about her tears, remembering how she had listened to my reading...

The storm passed, the stars came out, and a quiet settled on the world. A bird I was not familiar with burst into song, repeating the same melody over and over again in different voices. This solitary sound rang strangely in the midst of the profound silence. And I had still not gone to bed...

The next morning I came down to the drawing room before everybody else and stopped in front of Yeltsova's portrait. "You've lost out," I gloated. "I simply went and read your daughter a forbidden book, see?" Suddenly I fancied... you have probably noticed that eyes *en face* always seem to

be looking straight at the viewer ... and now I fancied that the old woman had turned a reproachful gaze upon me.

I walked away to the window and saw Vera Nikolayevna. She was walking down a garden path with a parasol on her shoulder and a thin white scarf on her head. I hurried out of the house and caught up with her to say good-morning.

"I didn't sleep all night," she told me. "I have a headache, I was hoping it would pass in the fresh air."

"Surely it's not because of the reading last night?" I asked.

"Of course it is. I'm not used to it. In that book of yours there are things that keep preying on my mind, I feel it is they that are burning my head so," she said, pressing a hand to her forehead.

"And that's a good thing, you know," I said. "What is bad is that your insomnia and headache might put you off reading such books."

"You think they might?" she asked, and, in passing, broke off a twig of wild jasmine. "God alone knows. I think that whoever steps on this road once will never come back."

Suddenly, she flung the twig away.

"Let us go and sit in the summer-house," she said. "And please do not remind me of that ... that book (she seemed to be afraid of speaking out the name *Faust*) unless I mention it to you myself."

We went into the summer-house and sat down.

"I am not going to speak to you about *Faust*, but you must allow me to congratulate you and tell you that I envy you."

"You envy me?" she asked, puzzled.

"Yes, yes. With a soul like yours, as I know you now, you have so many delights in store for you! There are other great poets besides Goethe: Shakespeare, Schiller ... and our Pushkin too ... you have to become acquainted with him also."

She remained silent as she traced designs on the sand with the tip of her parasol.

Oh, my dear friend, Semyon Nikolayevich! If you could see how sweet she was in that moment: pale to the point of transparency, bent forward a little, tired, inwardly upset—and for all that radiantly clear like the sky! I talked and

talked and finally I fell silent and just sat looking at her...

Without raising her eyes she went on tracing designs with her parasol, erasing them, and starting again. Suddenly we heard a child's quick steps and Natasha came running in. Vera Nikolayevna straightened up and, to my surprise, hugged her daughter with an impetuous sort of tenderness. She was not habitually demonstrative. And then Priimkov appeared. Schimmel, that neat grey-haired infant, had gone off at dawn so as not to miss lessons. We went back to the house for breakfast.

However, I feel tired. It's time I ended this letter. It must sound stupid and muddled to you. I feel muddled myself. I'm ill at ease. I don't know what's the matter with me. I keep seeing that summer-house with the bare walls, the lamp on the table, the door opened into the fragrance and freshness of the night, and there, beside that door, a listening young face, flowing white robes... I understand now why I wanted to marry her; it seems I was not as stupid before going to Berlin as until now I believed I was. Yes, Semyon Nikolayevich, your friend is in a strange state of mind. All that will pass, I know, but what if it doesn't? Ah well, if it won't pass, it won't. Still, I am pleased with myself: first, I had a wonderful evening, and second: if I did awaken that soul, who can blame me? Old Yeltsova is nailed to the wall and must keep her mouth shut. That old woman! Not all the particulars of her life are known to me, but what I do know is that she eloped from her father's house; obviously it was her Italian mother's temperament in her. She wanted to insure her daughter... We shall see...

Enough written. Please think anything you wish of me, but don't jeer at me in writing, mock that you are. You and I are old friends and we have to spare one another. Goodbye.

Yours, P. B.

LETTER FIVE

From P. B. to S. V.

July 26th, 1850.

I have not written you for a long time, dear Semyon Nikolayevich, for more than a month, I think. There was something to write about, but I was too lazy to make the

effort. To tell you the truth, I hardly thought about you all this time. However, from your last letter I gather that you are assuming things about me which are wrong, or at least not quite right. You think that I am infatuated with Vera (calling her Vera Nikolayevna feels awkward somehow), but you are mistaken. I see her very often, of course, and I find her extremely attractive ... but who wouldn't? I'd like to see you in my place. She is an amazing creature! She is acutely perspicacious and at the same time unsophisticated like a child, she has sound common sense and an inborn feeling for beauty, she is forever striving for the truth, for the loftiest ideal, and she understands everything, even the vicious and the risible and her sweet feminine loveliness spreads over all that, like the white wings of an angel. Ah, what is there more to say! In the course of this last month we read much together, and talked much. Reading with her is a delight I have never experienced before. It's as if you are discovering new worlds. She does not go into raptures over anything—everything noisy is alien to her nature; she seems to glow softly when she likes something, and her face takes on such a noble and kind ... yes, kind, expression. Since infancy Vera has been kept in ignorance of lies, she does not know what lying is, she is accustomed to the truth, she lives by the truth, and so in poetry, too, only the truth appears natural to her: she recognises it instantly, without strain or effort, like a familiar face ... it's a great advantage and joy! Her mother must be given her due for this. The times I thought, looking at Vera, how right Goethe was to say that: "A good man in his vague striving always feels where the real road lies."* The one annoying thing is that the husband is underfoot all the time. (Please don't laugh your silly laugh, and even in thought do not defile our chaste friendship.) He is as capable of understanding poetry as I am of playing the flute, but he does not want to lag behind his wife, he also desires to become enlightened. Sometimes she, too, tries my patience sorely: she has a sudden change of mood, she doesn't want to read, she doesn't want to talk, she starts embroidering something,

* "Ein guter Mensch in seinem dunkeln Drange ist sich der rechtes Weges wohl bewusst," from the "Prologue in the Skies", Goethe's *Faust*, Part I.

romps with Natasha, discusses something with the house-keeper, goes running off to the kitchen, or simply sits looking out of the window, or else starts playing cards with nanny... I noted that it was best not to bother her then and simply wait until she comes up to me herself, begins a conversation or picks up a book. She has an independent mind of which I'm very glad. Remember, in the days of our youth, some girl or other would repeat your own words to you as best she could, and you admire this echo and, perhaps, worship it until you saw through it at last. Not this girl, no. This one is nobody's echo. She takes nothing at face value, superior knowledge can't intimidate her, she won't argue but she won't give in either. We've had many a discourse on *Faust*, and—funny thing—she never says anything about Gretchen herself and only listens to what I have to tell her. Mephistopheles frightens her not as a devil but as “something there can be in every man”... These are her words. I tried to explain to her that we call this something a reflex, but she did not understand the word in the German sense, she only knows the French word “réflexion” and is used to regarding it as a good state of mind to be in. Our relationship is quite amazing, really. I may say that on the one hand I have a strong influence upon her, I am educating her, as it were, but on the other hand she herself is also changing me for the better in many respects. For instance, it is only thanks to her that I have lately discovered what a heap of conventional, rhetorical stuff there is in many splendid, famous poems. Whatever leaves her cold already becomes suspect in my eyes. Yes, indeed, I have become a better person, clearer-minded. It is impossible to be close to her, to see her all the time, and remain one's former self.

So what will all this develop into? you will ask. Nothing, I honestly think. I shall spend the time until September most pleasantly here, and then I'll depart. Life will seem dark and dull to me the first months, but then I'll get used to it. I know how dangerous any kind of contact between a man and a young woman can be, how imperceptibly one feeling is replaced by another. I would “pull out” if I was not aware that we are both perfectly tranquil. True, something strange did happen once. I don't know how or why, all I remember is that we were reading *Eugene Onegin*, and I

kissed her hand. She moved away slightly, looked me straight in the eyes (I have never seen a look like that in anyone else— thoughtful, intent and sort of stern), blushed suddenly, got up and left the room. That day I did not manage to be alone with her again. She avoided me, and for four solid hours played a silly game of cards with her husband, nanny and the governess! The next morning she suggested to walk in the garden. We walked right through it to the very lake. Suddenly, without turning round, she whispered: "Please, never do that again," and quickly began talking of something else. I felt put to shame very badly.

I must confess that she is on my mind all the time, and it may be that I started writing this letter to you simply to give myself a chance to think and talk about her. I hear the hoofbeats and snorting of horses: it's the carriage for me. I am going to the Priimkovs'. My coachman has stopped asking me where to go when I climb into the carriage and takes me straight there. Their estate suddenly comes into view from behind the birch wood on a sharp turn in the road when it's still two versts to go... And every time I see the glitter of the windows in the distance my heart stops for a joyful moment. Schimmel (that harmless old chap comes over sometimes, and as for the Princes X. they only came once, thank God) ... well, no wonder Schimmel says in his modestly solemn manner pointing to Vera's house: "The abode of peace!" It is indeed an angel of peace who dwells in that house...

*Your wings divine spread over me,
My troubled heart again make whole.
Ah, in your shadow just to be,
What bliss for an enchanted soul! **

Well, I'm closing, or else you'll think heaven knows what. Until next time... Who knows what I shall be writing you next time! Goodbye. By the way, she never says goodbye, always: "Well, goodbye," I like it awfully.

Yours, P. B.

P. S. I don't remember if I told you, but she does know that I once asked her mother for her hand.

* An excerpt from a poem by Fyodor Tyutchev, a famous Russian 19th-century poet.

LETTER SIX
From P. B. to S. V.

August 10th, 1850.

You expected this letter to be either despairing or elated, didn't you? Own up. Well it's neither. It's just an ordinary letter. Nothing new has happened, nor can it happen, it seems. The other day we went for a boat ride on the lake. I shall describe this boat ride for you. There were three of us: she, Schimmel, and I. Why does she want to invite this old chap all the time I don't know. The Princes X are displeased with him, they say that he is neglecting his duties. However, on this occasion he was quite amusing. Priimkov did not come with us because he had a headache. The weather was nice and jolly: large, ragged white clouds in the blue sky, a sparkle on everything, rustling trees, water splashing and slapping against the shore, snaking flashes of gold on the waves, freshness and sunlight! At first, the German and I rowed, then we raised the sail and skimmed along at great speed. The bow went diving in and out of the water, and behind us we left a hissing, frothing trail. She sat at the rudder and steered. She had tied a scarf round her head—a hat would have been blown off—but her locks escaped it and fluttered in the wind. She held the rudder firmly with her sunburnt hand and smiled at the spray flying into her face. I curled up on the floor of the boat, near her feet; the German got out his pipe, lighted it and—imagine—began to sing in a rather pleasant basso. First, he sang the old song *Freu't euch des Lebens*, then an aria from the *Magic Flute*, and then a love song called "The ABC of Love". The whole alphabet is there, woven into decent ditties, naturally, beginning with A, B, C, D—*Wenn ich dich sehe!* and ending with U, V, W, X—*Mach einen Knix!* He sang all the verses with great feeling, and you should have seen how slyly he winked at the word *Knix*. Vera laughed and shook a finger at him. I said that Herr Schimmel must have been quite a gallant in his day. "Oh yes, I could hold my own," he replied with dignity, knocked out his pipe into his hand and bit at the mouth-piece with a reckless air as he delved in his pouch with his fingers. "When I was student," he added, "Oh-ho-ho! " He did not say more, but that "oh-ho-ho! " of his

spoke volumes! Vera asked him to sing another students' song and he sang *Knaster, den gelben*, but he went off key at the last note. He was in excessively high spirits. In the meantime, the wind had grown stronger, the waves were quite big now, and the boat careened slightly. The swallows streaked very low around us. We changed the position of the sail and began to manoeuvre. Suddenly, the wind gusted, we weren't quick enough, a wave dashed over the side of the boat and there was a lot of water on the floor. And this was when old Schimmel showed his worth: he snatched the rope from my hands and set the sail right, saying: "*So macht man's in Cuxhafen!*"—"That's how it's done in Cuxhafen! "

Vera must have had a fright because she blanched but did not say a word, reserved as always, and simply picked up her skirts and placed her feet on the cross-piece. A poem of Goethe's came to mind (I have become totally infected by him) "Thousands of wavering stars shine on the waves..."*, remember? and recited it. When I came to the verse: "Oh, eyes of mine, why do you drop?" she raised hers slightly (she was sitting higher up and so I watched her from below) and gazed into the distance, narrowing her eyes up against the blasts of wind... Suddenly there was a cloudburst, and the raindrops went skipping on the water in bubbles. I offered her my overcoat, and she draped it over her shoulders. We pulled in to the shore—not at the landing stage—and walked back to the house. I held her arm. There was something I wanted to say to her, I felt, but I kept silent. I do remember asking her why she always sat under Madame Yeltsova's portrait whenever she was in the drawingroom, like a nestling under its mother's wing. "Your comparison is very apt," she replied. "I should have liked to stay under her wing forever." "Wouldn't you want to break free?" I asked. She made no response.

I don't know why I told you about that boat ride, unless because I remember it as one of the happiest events of these last days, although actually how could it be called an event? It was so blissful, so wordlessly joyful that tears, painless and happy tears, rose to my eyes.

* Lines from Goethe's poem *Auf der See*.

Imagine this: next morning, as I walked past the summer-house, I heard a woman singing in a rich, pleasant voice that song *Freu't euch des Lebens*. I looked inside—it was Vera. “Bravo! ” I cried. “I didn’t know you had such a good voice! ” She blushed and fell silent. I mean it, she does have an excellent, powerful soprano. I’m sure she never suspected that she had a good voice... There is so much more untapped wealth in her! She does not know her own self. Isn’t a woman like that a rarity in our day?

August 12th.

We had a very, very strange conversation yesterday. We were talking about ghosts. She believes in ghosts and says that she has her own reasons for it. Priimkov, who was also there, lowered his eyes and nodded, confirming her words, as it were. I asked her all sorts of questions but soon noticed that she found the subject unpleasant. Then we went on to imagination, the power of imagination. I told her how passionately I dreamed of happiness in my youth (daydreaming being the usual pastime of people who have no luck in life), dreaming, among other things, of spending a blissful few weeks in Venice with the woman I loved. I thought about this so often, especially at night, that little by little a complete picture took shape in my imagination, a picture I could call up whenever I wished: all I had to do was close my eyes. This is what I saw: Night. A moon shedding a soft white light. A smell of lemon, you think? No, of vanilla, of cactus. I see a still, wide lake, a flat island overgrown with olive trees, and on the island, close to the water’s edge, a small marble villa with wide-open windows, and these’s music coming I don’t know from where. Inside the villa there are trees with dark leaves and the light of a partly draped lamp. From one of the windows hangs a heavy velvet drape with a golden fringe, and one end of it lies upon the water. And there, in the window, sit *he* and *she* close together, their arms resting on the cloak, draped over the windowsill, and they gaze into the distance where Venice can be glimpsed. I pictured all this so clearly as if I had seen it with my own eyes. She heard out my ravings and said that she, too, liked to daydream, but her dreams were a different

kind: she either imagined herself in the African savanna with some traveller, or else she was looking for traces of Franklin in the Arctic Ocean, and she vividly pictured all the privations she would have to endure, and all the difficulties she'd have to overcome...

"You've read too many travel stories," remarked her husband.

"Perhaps, but if you dream at all, why dream of the impossible?"

"But why not?" I asked, "Why leave the impossible out in the cold?"

"I put it wrong," she said. "What I meant to say was why weave dreams about oneself, about one's own happiness? Why think about it, if it doesn't come it's no use chasing after it. It's like good health: if you don't notice your health it means it's good."

Her words amazed me. There is a greatness of spirit in that woman, believe me... From Venice the talk drifted to Italy, to Italians. Priimkov left the room, and Vera and I remained by ourselves.

"You have Italian blood in your veins," I remarked.

"I have, and would you like me to show you a portrait of my grandmother?" she asked.

"If you'd be so kind."

She went to her study and brought back a rather large gold locket. She opened it, and inside were two excellently painted miniature portraits of her maternal grandfather and his wife—that peasant girl from Albano. The likeness of Vera's mother to her father was astonishing. Only his face, framed in a cloud of white powdered hair, was even sterner, the features sharpened and more prominent, and a glum stubbornness lurked in his little yellow eyes. But the Italian girl! What a voluptuous face, open like a rose in bloom, with large, limpid, full eyes, and a self-satisfied smile on the rosy lips! Her fine, sensual nostrils seem to be still quivering and distending from recent love. There is a sultriness in her dark cheeks, an awareness of health, of magnificent youth and female power... That forehead has never entertained a thought, and a good thing it hasn't! She is shown wearing her native Albano dress, and the painter (a true master!) has placed a twig of grapevine in her pitch-

black hair which has bright grey glints in it: this bacchanalian ornament suits the expression of her face perfectly. And do you know who this face reminded me of? My Manon Lescaut in the black frame. And the most amazing thing of all is that looking at the miniature it struck me that I sometimes caught something like that smile and that glance in Vera although there is no facial resemblance at all...

Yes, I repeat, neither Vera herself nor anyone else in the world knows what still lies dormant in her...

By the way, just before the wedding Yeltsova told Vera the story of her life, all about the death of her Italian mother and everything, probably as a warning. What affected Vera most strongly was what she learnt about her grandfather, that mysterious Ladanov. Can this be why she believes in ghosts? It's strange, she herself is so pure and clear, yet she is afraid of everything sombre and infernal, and believes in it...

Enough for now. Why write all this? However, it has already been written, so I might as well send it off to you.

Yours, P. B.

LETTER SEVEN

From P. S. to S. V.

August 22nd.

I am taking up the pen again ten days after my last letter to you. Oh, my friend, I cannot hide it any longer. The torment that is mine! I love her so! You cannot imagine the bitterness and the trepidation with which I am writing that fateful word. I am not a youngster, not even a young man, I have already reached the age when it's practically impossible to deceive anyone else, yet it's the easiest thing to deceive oneself. I know and see everything clearly. I know that I am almost forty, that she is the wife of another man and that she is fond of her husband; I also know very well that this unfortunate infatuation that has taken possession of me will bring me nothing but secret torments and will drain me utterly of my vital strength: I know all that, there's nothing I can hope for and nothing I want. But that doesn't make it any easier on me. It is about a month since I began to notice that I was more and more powerfully drawn to her. It was disconcerting in a way, but also enjoyable... But how could

I imagine that once again I was going to go through something that seems as irrevocable as youth? But what am I talking about! I never loved anyone like that, never! Ma-non Lescaut and Frétilion* those were my idols. Such idols are easy to smash. And now, only now I have come to know what it is to love a woman. I am ashamed to confess it even, but it is true. I am ashamed... Whatever anyone says, love is an egoistical feeling, and it is unpardonable for a man of my age to be an egoist. At thirty-seven you can't live a self-centred life: you have to do some good, pursue an aim, perform your duty, your work. And so I tried to get down to work... But a windstorm has again scattered my good intentions. I understand now what that "something" I still had to experience was: the "something" I wrote you about in my first letter. The blow crashed down on my head so unexpectedly! I stand and stare stupidly before me: a black veil hangs before my very eyes, my heart is heavy and frightened. I can control my feelings, outwardly I am calm not just in the presence of others but even when I am by myself. After all, I can't go haywire like a lovesick youngster, can I? Still, the worm has crawled into my heart and sucks my blood day and night. What will the outcome be? Until now, I fretted when away from her but calmed down the moment I saw her. What frightens me is that I've begun to fret and worry even when I am with her. Oh, my friend, the misery of being ashamed of your tears, of hiding them! Only the young may cry: tears are becoming to the young alone...

I cannot re-read this letter, it was like a moan, bursting from me in spite of myself. I cannot add anything, or write of anything else... Give me time, and I'll come to my senses, I shall master my emotions, and I shall speak to you like a man, but just now I'd like to put my head on your shoulder and...

Oh Mephistopheles! Even you are no help to me. I stopped intentionally, I intentionally teased the ironic vein in me to jolt myself awake and picture how laughable and sickening these complaints and outpourings of mine will appear to me a year or half a year hence... No, Mephistopheles is no help, and his teeth have become blunted... Good-bye.

Yours, P. B.

* *Frétilion*—a nickname of a famous French singer and dancer Clairon (Leris de la Tude) (1723-1803).

LETTER EIGHT
From P. B. to S. V.

September 8th, 1850.

My good friend, Semyon Nikolayevich,

You took my last letter too much to heart. You know that I have always been prone to exaggerate my feelings. I can't help it, I'm as bad as a woman. It will pass with the years, of course, but I must confess with a sigh that I have not changed for the better yet. So don't worry any more. I am not going to deny the impression made upon me by Vera, but I am going to say that there's nothing extraordinary in this whole business. There is no point in your coming here, as you suggest. It would be sheer madness for you to come galloping here, over thousands and thousands of miles, for nothing, really. But I am very grateful to you for this new proof of your friendship and, believe me, I shall never forget it. For another thing, your travelling all the way here would be inopportune because I myself intend to leave for Petersburg shortly. Sitting on your sofa I shall have a great deal to tell you, but just now I honestly don't feel like it: I might get carried away and get muddled again. I'll write when I am ready to leave. See you soon. Keep in good health and in good cheer, and don't lose too much sleep over your devoted friend P. B.

LETTER NINE
From P. B. to S. V.

March 10th, 1853.

I left your letter unanswered for such a long time, but I kept thinking about it all these days. I felt that it was not idle curiosity but a friend's sincere sympathy that lay behind it, but still I wavered: should I follow your advice, should I comply with your wish? My mind is made up at last, and I shall tell you everything. I do not know if my confession will bring me relief, as you believe it will, but I think I've no right to keep from you that which has forever changed my life, I think it would make me guilty ... alas! would make me even more guilty against that dear, unfor-

gettable shadow if I did not confide our sad secret to the only heart I still treasure. Probably you alone in the world know about Vera and you judge her lightly and mistakenly: that I cannot allow. Hear everything then. Alas! This "everything" can be told in a few words. It was like a flash of lightning between us, and like lightning it brought death and disaster...

More than two years have passed since her demise, since I settled down in this remoteness which I shall not leave until the end of my days, but everything stands out so clearly in my memory, my wounds are still so raw, my grief is so bitter...

I am not going to whine. Complaints exacerbate yet assuage grief, but not in my case. I shall simply tell you what happened.

Remember my last letter, the one in which I wanted to allay your apprehensions and talked you out of coming here? You were right to suspect its put-on flippant tone and to disbelieve me when I said that we would soon meet in Petersburg. The day before I wrote that letter to you she told me that she loved me.

Now that I have put these words down in writing, I realise how difficult it will be for me to go on. The haunting thought of her death will torment me with redoubled force, the memories will scorch me... But I shall try to take myself in hand, and I shall either stop writing or I'll tell you the whole truth with not a word out of turn.

This is how I learnt that Vera loved me. Before everything else I've got to tell you (and you must believe me) that until then I honestly did not suspect anything like that. True, she began to have her pensive moods, something I never noticed before, but I had no idea what was causing them. And then one day, on September the 7th—a memorable day for me—this is what happened. You know how I loved her, what anguish I was suffering. I wandered about like a lost soul, I could not fix my mind on anything. I meant to stay at home that day, but then my resolve snapped and I rushed off to her. I found her alone in the study. Priimkov was out hunting. When I entered the room Vera gave me an intent look and ignored my greeting. She was sitting at the window with a book in her lap: I recognised

it at once, it was my *Faust*. Her face betrayed weariness. I sat down opposite her. She asked me to read aloud for her that scene where Gretchen asks Faust if he believes in God. I took the book from her and began to read. When I finished I glanced at her. She sat with her arms folded, her head resting against the back of the armchair, and she was still looking as intently at me as before.

I don't know why, but my heart suddenly raced.

"What have you done to me!" she said slowly.

"I have?" I faltered.

"Yes, you. What have you done to me!" she repeated.

"You mean why did I persuade you to read such books?"

Silently she stood up and walked out of the room. I followed her with my eyes.

In the door she stopped and turned round.

"I love you," she said. "That's what you've done to me."

The blood rushed to my head...

"I love you, I'm in love with you," Vera repeated.

She went out and shut the door behind her. I am not going to describe to you what happened to me then. I remember I went out into the garden, plunged into the thickets, leaned against a tree and stood thus for I don't know how long. I was numbed; a wave of happiness swept over my heart from time to time... No, I am not going to dwell on this. Priimkov's voice recalled me to reality: he was back from hunting and having been told that I had come he went in search of me. He was surprised to find me alone and hatless in the garden, and led me back to the house. "My wife is in the drawing-room, let us join her there," he said. You can imagine what I felt entering that room. Vera was sitting in a corner, embroidering on a tambour; I stole a glance at her, and for a long time did not dare raise my eyes. To my amazement she appeared composed and I caught no troubled note in what she said or how she said it. At long last I ventured to look at her. Our glances met. She blushed ever so slightly and bent over her embroidery. I began to watch her. She seemed to be dismayed; a mirthless little smile touched her lips at moments.

Priimkov left the room. Quickly she lifted her head and asked me in quite a loud voice:

"And what do you intend to do now?"

In confusion and haste, I replied in a hollow voice that I intended to withdraw, it being the duty of an honourable man, "because I love you, Vera Nikolayevna, you must have long noticed it". She bent over her sewing once more with a pensive frown.

"I have to talk it over with you," she said. "After tea this evening come to our little summer-house ... you know, the one where you read *Faust*."

She said this so clearly that till this day I wonder how Priimkov who walked in at that very moment failed to hear it. The day dragged so sleepily and dreamily. Now and then Vera started up as from a dream and looked around her wonderingly. But at the same time I read resolve in her face. And I ... I could not recover my senses. Vera loved me! Those words kept going round and round in my head, but I did not understand them, just as I did not understand myself or her. Such happiness was too unexpected, too staggering to believe. With an effort I recalled what had gone before this, and also looked and spoke as in a dream...

After tea, when I was already beginning to plan how best to slip out of the house unnoticed, she suddenly announced that she wanted to go for a walk, and invited me to accompany her. I did not dare speak, I held my breath waiting for her to say the first word, to explain what she had in mind, but she kept silent. In silence we came to the summer-house, in silence we walked in, and here—I still don't know, I still can't understand how it happened—but suddenly we were locked in a close embrace. Some invisible force had flung me to her, and her to me. In the waning light of the day, her face lit up with a smile of self-abandonment and tenderness, and our lips blended in a kiss...

That kiss was our first, and the last.

Suddenly, she tore free of my embrace and sprang away from me with horror in her staring eyes.

"Look over there," she told me in a quivering voice. "Can't you see anything?"

I turned quickly.

"No, nothing. Do you see anything?"

"I don't now, but I did."

She was breathing in deep, slow gasps.

"What did you see? Whom?"

"My mother," she uttered, and trembled all over.

I shuddered too, a chill ran over me. I felt frightened, as if I were a criminal. But wasn't I a criminal at that moment?

"Come now, come," I began. "You'd better tell me..."

"No, for the love of God, no!" she cried and clutched her head. "That's madness... I am going out of my mind... It mustn't be taken lightly—it's death... Goodbye..."

I held out my arms to her.

"Stay, I implore you, if only for a moment," I cried impulsively. I did not know what I was saying, I was near collapse. "This is too cruel... I implore you..."

She glanced at me.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow evening, not today, I beg you ... go away now ... tomorrow evening come to the garden gate near the lake. I'll be there, I'll come, I promise you I'll come," she spoke in a passion, her eyes flashing. "I swear I'll come no matter who tries to stop me! I'll tell you everything tomorrow, only let me go now."

And before I could utter a word, she disappeared.

Shaken to the depths of my being, I remained where I was. My head was in a whirl. But through the wild joy that filled the whole of me, I sensed distress stealing in. I looked about me. The damp, windowless summer-house where I was standing appeared sinister to me with its low ceiling and dark walls.

I hurried out, and walked to the house with heavy steps. Vera was waiting for me on the terrace. As I approached, she went indoors and retired to her bedroom at once.

I went home.

I cannot put in words how I passed that night and the next day. All I remember is that I lay with my face in my hands seeing again her smile before we kissed and whispering: "That's love, at last..."

I was also remembering what Vera told me her mother once said to her: "You are like ice; so long as you don't melt you will remain as secure as rock, but once you melt there'll be nothing left of you."

And there was another thing that came to mind: once, Vera and I were talking about ability and talent, and she said:

"I have only one ability—to keep silent till the last minute."

I had no idea what she meant.

"But what had frightened her so?" I was asking myself. "Can it be that she really saw her mother? Only her imagination, of course." And once again I indulged in thoughts of the coming rendezvous.

It was on that day that I wrote you that flippant letter—I shudder to remember what thoughts were then in my head.

The sun had not yet set but I was already waiting in the tall, thick willow shrubbery on the lake shore some fifty yards from the garden gate. I had come on foot. To my shame I must confess that I was choking with fear, the most cowardly fear, I started nervously all the time, but I felt no remorse. Hiding among the branches I kept my eyes fastened on the gate. It remained shut. The sun set, dusk gathered, then the stars came out and the sky turned dark. She did not come. I grew feverish. Night descended. Unable to stand it any longer, I climbed out of the shrubs and stole to the gate. All was quiet in the garden. In a whisper I called out: Vera, Vera, Vera... There was no answering call. Another half-hour passed, then an hour. It grew pitch dark. I was at the end of my tether. I pulled in the shadow of the lime trees.

Almost all the windows of the house were alight, and there were people walking up and down the rooms. Surprising, because as far as I could make out in the faint light of the stars my watch said half-past eleven. Suddenly the knocking of wheels came from the other side of the house: a carriage was driving off.

"They have guests, evidently," I said to myself. Losing all hope of seeing Vera, I left the garden quietly and went home at a brisk step. It was a dark, September night, but it was warm and windless. Little by little the disappointment or rather the sorrow I felt became dissipated, and I arrived home feeling a bit tired from the fast walk but pacified by the quiet of the night, and feeling happy and all but gay. I went to my bedroom, dismissed Timofei, flung myself down on the bed with all my clothes on, and fell into a reverie.

My daydreams were blissful at first, but soon I became aware of a strange change in myself. I had begun to feel a secret, nagging anguish, a lurking anxiety. I could not explain it, but I had an eerie premonition of imminent disaster, I felt as if someone dear to me were suffering in that moment and calling me to help. On the table, a wax candle burned with a small motionless flame, the pendulum of the wall clock swung to and fro with a ponderous, measured knocking. I propped up my head with a hand and stared into the empty semi-darkness of my lonely room. I thought about Vera, and my heart ached: everything I had so rejoiced in now appeared to me as a disaster—which was only to be expected—a hopeless impasse. The feeling of anguish mounted in me until I could not remain in bed any longer: I suddenly fancied that someone was calling me in a beseeching voice... I raised my head with a start: it was not fancy, a piteous scream did come from afar and clung quivering to the dark panes of my window. I felt frightened. I jumped out of bed and flung the window open. A moan burst into the room and whirled above me. My blood running cold, I listened to its last, dying sounds. It was as if someone were being slaughtered somewhere far away, and the poor victim was vainly begging for mercy. It may have been an owl screeching in the wood, or perhaps some other creature had emitted that moan, but I did not stop to think what it was and, like Mazepa to Kochubei, responded to that sinister sound with a shout*.

“Vera! Vera! Is it you calling me?” I cried.

Timofei, sleepy-faced and bewildered, appeared before me.

I came to my senses, drank a glass of water, and in vain tried to fall asleep in another room. My heart beats were painful, although they were not fast. I could no longer in-

* Ivan Mazepa (1644–1709), a hetman in the Ukraine, turned pro-Polish and during the Northern War between Russia and Sweden deserted to the Swedes. Peter I had been warned of the intended treachery by Kochubei, a Ukrainian military commander and statesman, but he continued to trust Mazepa and betrayed Kochubei to him for slander. Mazepa had Kochubei executed after first subjecting him to brutal torture. According to Pushkin's poem *Poltava* it was Kochubei's scream coming from the torture chamber that brought a shout from Mazepa.

dulge in dreams of happiness: I dared not believe in happiness any more.

The next day, before dinner, I went to the Priimkovs.

"My wife is ill," Priimkov told me, looking worried. "She's in bed, I had sent for the doctor."

"What is it?"

"I can't understand it. She went out into the garden late in the evening yesterday, and returned almost at once terribly frightened and beside herself. Her maid came running for me, I asked my wife what had happened to her, but she did answer by so much as a word and took to her bed at once. She was delirious in the night. In her delirium she said heaven knows what things, and mentioned you, too. Her maid told me an amazing thing, she says that Vera saw her dead mother in the garden, and she fancied that her mother was coming towards her with outspread arms."

You can imagine what I felt when he told me that.

"It's nonsense, of course," Priimkov said. "Still, I must confess that extraordinary things of this kind have been known to happen to my wife."

"Tell me, is Vera Nikolayevna very ill?"

"Yes, she's ill. It was really bad in the night; she's sleeping now."

"But what did the doctor say?"

"The doctor says that the illness has not yet become defined..."

March 12th.

I cannot continue the way I began, my good friend, it costs me too great an effort and makes my wound hurt too terribly. The illness became defined, to quote the doctor, and Vera died of it. She did not last more than two weeks after that fatal day of our fleeting rendezvous. I saw her once more before she died. I have no memory more cruel. I already knew from the doctor that there was no hope. Late at night, when everyone in the house had gone to bed, I stole up to the door of her bedroom and peeped in. Vera lay in bed with her eyes closed, a feverish flush on her cheeks, and looking so small and thin. I stared at her, petrified. Suddenly she opened her eyes, peered hard at me

and stretching out her wasted arm uttered in a voice so frightening that I turned and fled:

*Was will er an dem heiligen Ort,
Der da ... der dort...**

All the time she was ill she raved of *Faust* and her mother whom she called now Marta, now Gretchen's mother.

Vera died. I went to her funeral. After that I gave up everything, and settled here for good.

Think over what I have told you, think about her, about that poor creature who has died so young. How could it have happened, how to explain that uncanny meddling of the death in the affairs of the living? That is something I don't know and never shall know. You will agree now that it was not a fanciful fit of spleen, as you called it, that compelled me to withdraw from society. I am not the man you used to know; there is much I believe in now which I never believed in before. All this time I have been thinking about this poor woman (I almost said girl), about her story, and the mysterious play of fortune which we, the blind, call blind chance. Who knows how many seeds are left behind by every living person on this earth and fated to sprout only after his death? Who will tell us by what mysterious chain the fate of man is linked with the fate of his children, his descendants, how they are affected by his aspirations, and how they are made to pay for his mistakes? We must all humble ourselves and bow before the Unknown.

So Vera died and I survived. I remember when I was a little child we had a beautiful alabaster vase in our house. Not a single blemish marred its virginal whiteness. One day, left alone in the room, I started rocking the pedestal on which it stood, and suddenly the vase toppled over and was smashed to smithereens. Mute from fright I stood motionless before the shards. My father came in, saw me and said: "Now look what you've done, our lovely vase is no more, it can never be made whole again." I burst into tears. I thought I had committed a crime.

I grew to manhood, and in my mature years mindlessly

* *What does he want here, in this holy place, That one ... here ... (Faust, Part I, last scene).—Author's note.*

smashed a vessel a thousand times more precious...

In vain I keep telling myself that I could not have expected such an instantaneous ending, that I myself was astounded by its suddenness, that I did not suspect what kind of being Vera was. Indeed, she knew how to keep her silence till the very last minute. I ought to have fled the moment I felt that I loved her, that I loved a married woman, but I stayed—and a thing of beauty was smashed to smithereens, leaving me to gaze in mute despair at my own handiwork.

Yeltsova guarded her daughter jealously indeed. She kept her safe till the last and at Vera's first incautious step she carried her off into the grave with her.

Time to stop... I have not told you even a hundredth part of what I should have told you, but enough said. Let everything that has risen to the surface drop to the bottom of my soul again... In conclusion, I will say this to you:

I derived one conviction from the experience of these last years: life is not a joke and not a game, it's not even a pleasure ... life is hard work. Renunciation, constant renunciation—that is its secret meaning, the solution to the riddle.

What man should worry about is not the realisation of his pet thoughts and dreamings, however lofty, but the performance of his duty. He cannot reach his goal without falling on the way unless he shackles himself with the iron chains of duty; when we are young we think that the freer we are the farther we shall go. It is permissible for the young to think that, but self-delusion becomes a shameful thing once the grim truth has looked you straight in the eyes at last.

Goodbye. In the old days I would have added: good luck. Now I shall say: endeavour to live, it is not as simple as it sounds. Think of me not in an hour of sorrow but in an hour of reflection, and preserve in your soul an image of Vera in all her sinless purity. Once more, goodbye.

Yours, P. B.

MIKHAIL SALTYKOV-SHCHEDRIN

(1826–1889)

Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin belongs to the finest satirists of the 19th century, and is justly called Gogol's heir.

The writer was born and bred in a provincial landed gentry's family, and the mores and manners of his milieu made the subject matter of many of his books.

Shchedrin went to the lycee in Tsarskoye Selo (one of the best schools in Russia of which Pushkin had been a pupil), and upon graduation took up a post in the War Office. He became closely associated with circles of revolutionary-minded young people, and imbibed the ideas of Utopian socialism which came to Russia from France. He published a story entitled "A Tangled Case" (1848) sharply criticising the existing social order, and for this was exiled to Vyatka, a provincial town, where he stayed for nearly eight years.

On return from exile, Shchedrin became active in the social life of the country: holding high posts, he tried to serve the people by fighting

against bribery and embezzlement of state property, and by defending the interests of the poor who had no rights at all. His writing, however, received a far more unanimous response. A friend and collaborator of Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky and Nekrasov, Saltykov-Shchedrin became in 1878 the editor-in-chief of "Otechestvenniye Zapiski", the most progressive journal of the times. The government banned the journal in 1884, but Shchedrin continued to spread his ideas, subjecting the existing system to trenchant, merciless criticism.

In his best stories— "Provincial Sketches (1856-57), "The Story of a Town" (1869-70), and "Yesteryear Life" (1887-89)—he satirizes Russia's officialdom and liberal intelligentsia for being incapable of taking any decisive action. His "Tales" (1869, 1862-86) may be called a summing up, and here his socio-political ideas are most vividly pronounced.

THE SAPIENT MINNOW

Once upon a time there lived a Minnow. Now, this Minnow's parents were known for their sense; little by little, and bit by bit they had lived to a ripe old age and never got cooked for fish soup or snapped up by pike. And the same good luck they wished their son. "Take care, Sonny," Father Minnow told him on the day of his death, "if you want to enjoy life, keep both eyes open! "

Now young master Minnow had a fine store of wits as well. He used them, and wherever he turned, he saw it was checkmate for him. The water was full of big fishes, and he, the Minnow, was the tiniest of the lot. Any old bully of a fish could gobble him up, and he could not gobble anyone. "And why should one gobble up anyone?" he questioned. At any moment the lobster might snap him in two with his claw, or the water flea might cling to his back and harass him to death. And even his own brother-minnows, when they saw him catch a gnat, would rush up in shoals to take it away. They'd snatch it right out of his mouth and then start fighting over it, till the gnat itself would be good-for-nothing.

And man—what an artful creature he was! What tricks he devised to murder the minnows, and for no good reason whatever! Draw nets and plain nets and creels, yes, and last but not least—the fishing line...

Now, could there be anything sillier than the fishing line? Just a plain strip of thread, with a hook at the end and a fly or worm stuck on for bait. The way they stuck it on, too—in the most unnatural posture imaginable. And yet it's mostly the fishing line that the minnows are caught with.

The old fish had warned him of the fishing line more than once. "Watch out for the line! " he would say. "Of course, it's the silliest of tackle, but we minnows are such

folk, it's the silliest that's surest with us. They toss you a fly—to do you good, supposedly—and there—you catch your death in that fly."

The old minnow also told him how he'd nearly landed in fish soup. The men came fishing in a gang that day, spread the net right across the river, and dragged it over the bottom for almost two versts. Goodness, the heaps of fish they caught then! Pike, roach, dace, chub—all were there. Even the lazy bream were whisked up from the slimy bottom. As for minnows, there was simply no counting them. And oh, the fright his old father had as they dragged him along—no tongue can tell nor pen describe. He felt himself driven on, and he didn't know where or whither. On one side of him was a pike and on the other a perch, "Lord! " thought he, "a few steps more, and one or the other'll eat me, sure as I'm a minnow! " But they didn't even touch him. "It wasn't a time for eating. Oh no, it wasn't, my boy! " The only thought was: "It's all over with us! " But why, for what reason—nobody knew. At last they began drawing in the wings of that net. They hauled it ashore and dumped the fish on the grass. Then it was that Father Minnow got the idea of fish soup. A red-coloured something spluttered on the sand, grey clouds rose from it, and such heat, he became faint and limp in a minute. It was bad enough being without water, but they kept on making it hotter and hotter. *Fire*, he heard them call it. And on that fire they placed something that was black, with the water in it raging as in a storm. That was a *pot*, he heard them say. "Chuck them in," they shouted, "and let's have fish soup! " And—plonkety-plonk! —they began to fling in the fish. Splash—the fish dived in, then jumped out like mad and again went under. And there it grew still—had a taste of fish soup, that is.

At first they didn't mind very much which fish they took, just plumped in one after another. But then an old fisherman looked at Father Minnow. "That nipper's no good for soup," he said, "let him grow up." He picked him by the gills and threw him into the free water. Father Minnow didn't hesitate, but swam home as fast as he could. Home he came, and there was his wife peering out for him, more dead than alive.

And would you believe it? Although he spared no pains in explaining what's what about fish soup, yet you'll hardly find a fish with a proper notion of fish soup to this day.

But young master Minnow remembered his father's instructions and minded them well. He was an astute young minnow, a moderate liberal in views, and he realized that life was a good bit harder than a feather bed. "Watch out, old boy," he said to himself, "or you'll never know when'll be the end of you!" And with that he set about the business of life. The first thing he did was to fashion for himself a burrow into which he and he alone could creep. A whole year it took him to hollow it out with his nose. And, oh, the terrors he went through! The nights he spent in the slime, in the sedge, or under the water burdock! At last, he finished it, and a fine burrow it was, clean and tidy, with just enough space for one. The next thing he did was to arrange the daily round of his life. At night when man, beast, bird and fish are sleeping, he would take exercise, while by day he would huddle up and shiver in his hole. But requiring victuals like all others and not drawing a salary or keeping servants, he would have to pop out about midday when the fish are full, and hunt up a worm or so if lucky. If not, he would slink back hungry into his burrow and lie there shivering again. "Better no grub and a whole skin, than lose your life with a full belly!"

And he lived up to his programme. At night he took exercise and bathed by moonlight, and by day huddled and shivered in his hole. Only at noon would he sally forth for a few mouthfuls. But it's little use hunting at noontide, when gnats shelter from the heat under leaves and bugs hide under bark. Oftener than not he would gulp a few draughts of water and have to be thankful.

Day in and day out he lay in his burrow, with hardly a wink of sleep and scarcely a bite of food, merely thinking: "Guess I'm alive! God, what will tomorrow bring?"

But now and again he would doze off and dream he had won two hundred thousand in a lottery. Wild with excitement he would turn over on his side, and—powers above! half his nose would be poking out of the hole! What if a pikelet were about? He'd drag him straight out, no doubt about it.

He woke up once from a doze like that and what should he see but a lobster right in front of his hole. There it was, staring, motionless, at the Minnow with its stony eyes, only its whiskers wriggling in the stream. The poor old Minnow got the scare of his life that time. It stayed there half the day, did that lobster, right until dark, waiting for the Minnow to swim out. And all the while the Minnow sat in his hole and shivered and shivered and shivered.

Another time he'd just got back after daybreak, yawning deliciously with the foretaste of sleep, when what should he see but a pike right at the doorway snapping its teeth. It spent the whole day there, lying in wait, as if the sight of the Minnow was a treat itself. But the sharp little Minnow dodged it. He didn't come out—that's all.

It wasn't once and it wasn't twice these things happened. Not by a long way. Every day the Minnow won such shivering victories and every evening he exclaimed: "Thank goodness, I'm still alive! "

But that wasn't all. He never married, did that Minnow, and he never had children, although his father's family had been quite a large one. "Father's life was a joke compared to mine," he reasoned. "The pike those days were much kinder, and the perch, too, didn't care for us small fry. And although my father almost landed in fish soup once, there was an old man handy to set him free. But nowadays fish are scarce in the river, so the Minnow, too, has come into esteem. Ah, no, no use even thinking of having a family. Keep alive yourself, it's about as much as one can do."

In this way the Sapient Minnow lived to a hundred years and more, all in a tremble day after day. He had no friends or relatives, he paid no visits and received no guests; he didn't play cards, drink wine or smoke tobacco, and never ran after pretty girls. All he did was just shiver and shake and think to himself: "Thank goodness, I'm still alive! "

At length even the pike—even they began to praise him. "Wouldn't it be fine if the riverfolk all lived like that! How quiet it would be in the river." They said this on purpose, of course, to lure the Minnow out. He never fell into that snare though, but baffled his foes once again.

How many years he lived after the first hundred, we can't say. But finally his hour struck. He lay dying in his

burrow and he thought: "Thank Heaven, I'm dying my own death, like my mother and father before me." And here he recalled the words of the pike: "Wouldn't it be fine if we all lived like the Sapient Minnow! " But really, what would life be like then?

He cast about with those priceless wits of his, and just as if someone had whispered it, he suddenly had the thought: "Why, if that were so the very race of minnow would die out! "

The first thing needed to carry on the race is a family. And a family this Minnow never had. But that wasn't the whole story. For the race of minnows to prosper and thrive, for its members to flourish, they should grow up in their native element and not in dark holes like his, where he'd gone half-blind in the eternal gloom. The young minnows must receive proper nourishment and must not avoid company; they must make each other's acquaintance and take over each other's virtues and accomplishments. In this way alone can they perfect the species and prevent their degenerating into sparring.

It is a wrong notion that only those minnows who stay in their holes shivering and half-mad with fear can be regarded as worthy citizens. No, they are not citizens at all, but at best worthless fry. Neither cold nor warmth do they inspire in others, neither fame nor infamy comes to them, no honour and no dishonour. Their life is nothing but a waste of food and space.

The Minnow realized all this so vividly, so keenly, that he was gripped with the desire to rush out and parade down the river with head high. But the thought had barely gone through his mind when he took fright again. And so in an agony of fear he lay dying. Shivering he had lived, and shivering he would die.

In a flash his whole life passed before him. What joy did he ever have? To whom did he offer any comfort or friendly advice? Had he ever sheltered or warmed or defended anyone? Who ever heard or thought of him? The answer was: nobody, none.

He had lived and shivered and nothing else. Even now, with death at his doorstep, the Minnow quaked with a fear of he knew not what. It was dark and stuffy in his hole, no-

where to move even. No sunbeam or warmth could steal into it. And the Minnow lay there in his damp, dim burrow, unseeing, helpless, unwanted, waiting till death from starvation should free him of his worthless existence.

He could hear other fish darting by, minnows like himself, perhaps. Not one of them cared a feather about him, not a fish would think: "Let me ask the Sapient Minnow how it is he lived to a hundred-odd years and never got swallowed by a pike, or snapped in two by a lobster, or caught on an angler's hook?" No, they just swam past, every one of them. And they didn't even know, perhaps, that there in his burrow the Sapient Minnow was nearing his end.

What stung most of all, he never heard mention of his marvellous sense. "You know the fat-head who refuses to eat and drink, who will not see anyone or let anyone see him, but just hangs on to that worthless life of his?" Nothing else would anyone say except some who simply called him a fool and a disgrace and wondered how the river could stand such a nuisance.

And so the Minnow pondered and pondered till at last he fell into a doze. It wasn't a doze, though, but the stupor preceding death. The first whispers of death sounded in his ears, and its faintness spread over his body. And once again he dreamed his pet dream: he had won two hundred thousand and grown half a yard long so he could gobble a pike himself.

And while he was dreaming, little by little, his nose edged right out of the hole...

And all of a sudden he vanished. What had happened—had a pike gulped him down, or a lobster snapped him in two, or had he died a natural death, nobody was there to tell. Most likely, he just died. For what joy could a pike find in swallowing an aged and dying Minnow, and a *Sapient Minnow* at that?...

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

VASSILY SLEPTSOV

(1836–1878)

Vassily Sleptsov's early works appeared in periodicals in the 1860s. In a review published in the journal "Sovremennik" (The Contemporary) in 1863, the writer Ivan Goncharov noted the appearance of a new talent and highly praised Sleptsov's "artistic sketches and stories about the common people's lives."

Sleptsov left a varied literary heritage: the sketches "The Vladimirka Road and the Klyazma River" (1862-63), numerous stories, the short novel "Difficult Times" (1865), and the novel "A Good Man" (1870).

The liberal writers Nikolai Pomyalovsky, Gleb Uspensky, Vassily Sleptsov and Fyodor Reshetnikov attempted to express the ideas of Russian revolutionary-democratic critics Nikolai Dobrolyubov and Nikolai Chernyshevsky in their works. They were far from idealizing the patriarchal peasant way of life. With the utmost realism they showed the peasants' life of subjugation, with all its hardships and deprivations, and the resulting backwardness and ignorance of the Russian peasantry.

Sleptsov himself, by nature a man of action, tried to realize the ideas of the revolutionary democrats in life. In 1862, he organized the Znamenskaya Commune, attempting to put socialist ideas into practice. He advocated the equality and emancipation of women, founded the journal "Zhenski Vestnik "(Women's Herald), and organized a society of female translators. Sleptsov was arrested and imprisoned in April 1866. He was suspected of having ties with Karakozov, who had attempted to assassinate the tsar.

M. Semanova, a contemporary researcher studying Sleptsov's work, notes that his stories, "were among the early attempts at creating a literature not only about the people, but for the people. They were written with a knowledge of peasant needs, anxieties and hopes, a deep feeling of respect for working people and without condescending idealism. Their simple structure, vivid images, characters and speech, and the absence of contrived situations and stylish embellishments made them accessible to the unsophisticated reader."

THE WARD*

Scenes from Village Life

I

A country road with dry, hard ruts ran along a large, steep clay ravine; at some spots lowering into the ravine itself and at others slithering along the top of the slope. At the bottom of the ravine there were scattered bushes and several yellowish pools above which hundreds of tiny midges swarmed. The sun was setting, and quail whistled in the browning rye.

A young peasant woman with a knapsack over her shoulder walked along the road. She wore an old, calico dress, worn boots on her bare feet, and a white scarf. She moved swiftly, swinging a stick. Every once in a while she would stop, shift the knapsack, look around, and again continue on, swaying evenly from side to side and staring off into the distance. But all she could see was the same ravine with dry, brown weeds, and plots of ripening rye.

Suddenly a cart rattled behind her. There was a peasant in it. The young woman moved off the road and walked faster, not looking back. The peasant, having come up even with the woman, slowed his horse.

"A good evenin' to you. Where're you goin'?"

The woman bowed, but did not look at the man nor answer his question, and continued along the side of the road.

The peasant looked at her.

"Hey! You! Woman! You hear me?"

The peasant woman walked on in silence.

The peasant stared at her, shook his head, muttered "deaf" to himself, and then waved his arms and shouted:

"Hey! You deaf or somethin'?"

The woman stopped.

"What d'you want?"

"Howdee."

"Howdee."

"How come you didn't answer? You saw I was talkin' to you."

The woman looked distrustfully at the peasant and then at his horse.

"Climb in, I'll give you a ride," the peasant said.

The woman hesitated.

"Climb in, I said, you ninny."

The woman thought it over and then got in.

"There we are," the peasant said. "Sit over there. I got salt in this here sack."

The woman picked up her skirt, moved over and laid her hand on the sack.

They started off.

After a moment's silence, the peasant spoke up.

"You comfor' ble."

"Yes," the woman said quietly.

"See. And you didn't want a ride. You been to church to pray?" he continued his questions.

"No. I'm ... there's this village... I got it written down." The woman made a move toward her bosom, but did not take anything from it and simply scratched under her arm.

"It's called Berdyaevo."

"Berdyaevo?"

"Berdyaevo or Gordeyevo. Yes, Gordeyevo."

"Where's that? I ain't heard of no village by that name 'round here. Where's it at?"

"I don't know."

The peasant looked at the woman in bewilderment.

"Where you from?"

"Far away."

"How come you're here?"

"My ... my little girl was given to people here ... she's a ward. I want to see her."

"But you don't know the name of the village?"

"No. And I don't know who to ask."

"You from Serpukhov?"

"No. From Moscow."

"Moscow! You sure come a far piece. Hmmm," the peas-

ant muttered thoughtfully, and after a pause, asked: "How big's your girl?"

"She's a little thing."

"Well, you'll find her, God be willin'. Sit back! Look at your legs! "

The woman looked down at her thin, tanned legs, stretched motionless in front of her and covered them with her skirt. The peasant shook the reins and waved his switch, and the horse ran faster, its unshod hooves loudly clapping on the dry road. The woman sat bouncing on the sack and looked around in silence. The sun had already set, and a breeze blew in from the field. Several huts appeared, and the road turned off to one side, running between plots and disappearing in the rye. The peasant lashed at the grass along the road with his switch and began to sing. They continued on another verst.

"What'd you say the name of that village was?" he asked the woman.

"M ... Mokay ... Mokeyeva."

"Well, we'll ask here. I got me a friend. He's an inn-keeper. The only thing is he's a swindler too."

They approached a village. The road ran behind some garden plots, past a threshing floor, and then through a hemp field before turning into a lane which led to a tavern. It was a poor village with about twenty houses. Several were being rebuilt following a fire and were without roofs. The new logs smelled of tar and smoke. There was not a soul on the street: the only people visible were three young girls at the edge of the village who were sitting on an earthen mound with their legs under their chins and singing at the top of their lungs:

*A bonny lad came from Peter,
Sent his loved one a newspaper.
The newspaper I received it,
And wit pleasure I did read it.*

The peasant stopped the horse at the tavern.

"You gonna get off?"

"No, I'll stay right here," the woman answered, shaking her head.

"Come on in! It's alright. Warm your bones. We got another five versts to go before we stop for the night."

"I ain't cold."

"Well, sit there then. I'll be right back."

The peasant went into the tavern. Sticking his head out the window, he shouted to the woman:

"How 'bout a pickle? Want me to bring you one?"

"No."

"These here are real juicy pickles. Just look at 'em. Well, if that's how you feel, go on sittin' there."

A dog walked over to the cart, sniffed at the horse tail, and returned to the earthen mound at the side of the tavern.

A light went on inside and one could see the peasant as he poured a small bottle of vodka into a glass, drank it down, wiped his mouth on the edge of his shirt and began talking to the innkeeper, tearing off a piece of dried fish with his fingers. One could also see the innkeeper's finger moving the balls on the abacus. He looked at the candle with sleepy eyes, scratched himself and left the counter. Finally the two men came out on the porch.

"Look at the woe-man I picked up."

"Not bad," the innkeeper said, yawning.

"What d'you think of us?" the peasant said, climbing into the cart. "Make a good pair? So long. Look here, if things go wrong ... send word... Don't let anythin' git past you."

"What's there to get past me," the innkeeper said. "God's speed."

The horse started off.

"Whoa! Whoa, boy! Is there a village 'round here called Sverbeyevo? No? Or maybe Gordeyevo?"

"Gordeyevo," the woman confirmed.

The innkeeper thought for a moment.

"I ain't heard of it. Why?"

"My woman needs to go there. We got us a little girl there. She..." The peasant turned to the woman: "What's your name?"

"Anisya."

"Well, Anisya. Show him that there paper where you got it written down. He knows his letters."

The woman was about to reach into her bosom, but she hesitated.

"What's the matter with you?" the peasant said. "Don't be afraid. He won't take it away. God, what a fool. He's only gonna look at it so he can tell you what it says. What'd he want your note for anyhow?"

The woman unwrapped a rag, removed a piece of paper, and handed it to the innkeeper. He went into the building and the peasant began to rummage around in a bag, talking all the while:

"He knows his letters. Tied it up and now I can't git it untied. He'll figure it out. The man's smart. Can't git the darn thing undone. There! Got it! Hey, what's your name? Anisya. Here, eat this. I reckon you're hungry," he said, shoving two buns at her. "I'm takin' 'em to my kids. They really love them things. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't want any," the woman said.

"Eat, you ninny."

"I don't want to."

"I said eat, damn it! "

The woman took the buns, but held them in her lap.

The innkeeper came out on the porch.

"Well, what's it say?" the peasant asked.

"It's written here Tselibeyevo. That should be Borki."

"Borki. That's beyond Shelepikha. I know the place. We'll find it now. You can rest easy," he assured the woman. She wrapped the paper back in the rag.

It was almost dark. After they passed through the village the peasant pulled a coat out from under him and handed it to the woman.

"Here, put this here thing on. You'll be warmer."

"That's alright," she said, but she put it on.

A little while later the peasant turned, looked her in the eye, and asked:

"Woman, why was you such a ninny, goin' and gettin' scared."

"When?"

"When I met you?"

The woman did not answer.

"Just like a woman," the peasant continued. "Stupid as they come. You think a man's goin' do you harm?" After a pause he added: "We'll find that little girl of yours."

"I pray to God," the woman whispered.

"Where's your man?"

"He died. A year back."

"You all alone?"

"Yes. I live at a merchant's where I do the cooking."

"Who give you that paper?"

"A clerk."

"What kind?"

"The one in the orphanage. I went there to find out where my little girl is."

"What happened?"

"That clerk told me my little girl'd been given to people in a village as a ward."

"How much he soak you for?"

"The first time he wanted five silver rubles. I been everywhere. Three different times. The first time they told me she was in a village sixty versts away, and I went."

"Didn't find her?"

"I found a ward, but not my girl. Mine's going on four and this one was eight."

"So you went all that way for nothin'?"

"Yes."

"What 'bout the other times?"

"The next time they gave me another address on the Mozhaïsk Highway. Another hundred versts beyond the village Mozhaïsk. There they told me the girl had died, but her name was Anfisa Yegorova and my girl's Praskovya."

"What'd that there clerk have to say?"

"He said it was a mistake. They got the numbers mixed up. This time, he said, I'll find her for sure."

"He's lying to you," the peasant said. "But he took your money all the same."

"The second time I gave him two silver rubles and a half-bottle of vodka. And I spent another ruble on serving him tea. This time I gave him one silver ruble."

"Them clerks sure clean you women out. You poor wench. All alone in the world. Your lot ain't a happy one,"

the peasant concluded, and became lost in thought. The woman was also silent.

After a while, the peasant poked the woman with his finger.

"Let me tell you 'bout myself and how them clerks did me in. 'Nother kind fellow like your clerk told me to git my freedom. Sit back, you'll be more comfor'ble. There you are. How come you don't eat them buns? So this fellow says that I can be free and even become a merchant. 'You're pullin' my leg!' I says. 'No, it's true,' he says. Well, this here clerk said he'll do it for fifteen silver rubles. I thought and thought and then said: 'The hell with it, write me that there paper.' He did, and because of that paper they beat the hell out of me. Must have gone through three rubles worth of switches. And I spent a year in prison. That's clerks for you. Got to watch out for 'em."

They arrived in the village where they were to spend the night, and pulled up in front of a house. The peasant knocked at the window and they were let in. The family was just about to go to bed. The woman entered the house, while the peasant went to unharness his horse. The master of the house had not yet returned from the fields.

It was stuffy inside, and flies buzzed around and crawled on faces. An old woman lay on the stove-bed, groaning, while the rest of the family was in the storeroom where it was cooler. The mistress came inside and, picking a flea off her sleeve, asked:

"You hungry?"

"No," the woman answered.

"Well, if you're goin' to bed, then go. I reckon you'll want to sleep with your man?"

At that moment the peasant entered, carrying the sack and his bag.

"I gave the horse some feed so I don't have to worry 'bout him for a while," he said to himself. "What you got to eat in the stove?"

"Nothin'. We didn't light it today," the mistress answered.

"Never mind. All I really need is some kvass. God be

praised! ” he exclaimed, scooping out a ladleful. “Kvass! That fish I ate in tavern was so salty I could drink a river. This kvass new?”

“Yes. Hasn’t stood long enough.”

“I could tell. It ain’t sour ’nough. I’ll git me ’nother ladleful. Holy Mother of God! I’m so thirsty.”

“Should I make you up a bed together?” the mistress asked yawning.

“Who, us? No, make up separate ones. Today me and her can’t be together. We’re fastin’.”

The mistress did not understand and smiling, asked:

“Yer what?”

“We want to be saved.”

“Strangest thing I ever heard,” the mistress said, shaking her head. “Are you...”

“Enough of that talk! ” the old woman on the stove-bed suddenly said. “It’s sinful! Only too happy to wag your tongue,” she grumbled at the mistress.

“What’s there to be happy about?”

“Have you got no shame? Tomorrow’s a church holiday.”

“Hey, grandma, why don’t you just lie there and go to sleep,” the peasant said.

“I’m lying’ here, sonny.”

“Good. And we’re ’bout to lie down. Anisya, you gonna sleep on the passage?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll go outside. Time to give the horse somethin’ to drink. Where’d you keep your pails? Listen, Anisya, you try to sleep, you hear me? We got to git up early in the mornin’,” he said, and left the house.

That night stars twinkled in the sky. Children’s regular breathing could be heard from the storeroom and the old woman tossed and turned and groaned the entire night.

The woman got up before dawn and prepared to leave. The peasant woke up as she was opening the gate.

“Where you goin’?”

“I’m off.”

"You crazy? What am I gonna do with you? Where are you off to so early?"

"It's easier to walk when it's cooler."

"Why are you gonna walk? We'll go together."

The woman stayed, and when the sun came up, they both left in the cart.

It was almost noon when they caught sight of a large village on a knoll, with a wooden church and gardens on the slopes leading down to the river.

"That there's Borki," the peasant said, pointing his switch at the village.

The woman stared intently ahead.

"The folks here are a tricky bunch," he continued, peering in front of him as if examining something. "Nothin' to brag 'bout, 'cept they're probably the richest peasants on this here earth. You could scour the whole world and you wouldn't find none like these. They're in trade, so they don't grow nothin'. They breed horses. Today they're celebratin' 'cause it's a holiday. Why not? No field work for them. There's the tavern."

Just before reaching the village the peasant stopped his horse and the woman climbed down.

"God be with you," the peasant said. "I wish you luck."

The woman put her knapsack over her shoulder and started off. The peasant began to fiddle with the wheel and glancing under the cart, said:

"I should have charged you for the ride. Enough for a glass of vodka, at least. After all, it's a holiday."

The woman returned.

"Climb in. I'll take you to the tavern. What can I do with you? Hiah! " he shouted to his horse. "He's a young one. Look at how fast we're goin'."

The cart flew to the tavern and stopped near the porch. There were already many people milling about. Some sat on the mounds of earth along the walls of the building, while others stood with their hands in their pockets and watched the street.

A retired soldier in a cotton print shirt was playing an accordion.

"Good day, brothers. You got a fine life here," the peasant said, climbing down.

"Yes, brother, we got us a fine life," the other peasants answered, puffing on their pipes.

II

After the midday meal people made merry. Groups gathered in various places and women sang songs in the lanes between the yards. Most of the peasant men grouped around the tavern. On the square, a desperate game of pitch-and-toss was in progress.

The woman went from house to house asking everyone if they knew of her daughter.

"Is there a little girl here called Praskovya?"

"What little girl?" a woman asked.

"About this high. Almost four. She's a ward."

"No, there ain't no girl like that here."

"You lookin' for a ward?"

"Yes."

"The Semushkins got a foster girl."

"What are you babblin' about. The Semushkins' girl is old enough to git married soon."

"So what? It's high time she married."

"But this here woman's lookin' for a little girl."

"It don't matter what she's lookin' for. Where you gonna find a little girl if there ain't one. If you're so concerned, why don't you bear one and give it to her?"

"You're a fine one to be tellin' me to give birth. You better look out for yourself."

"Why should I look out for myself when there's nothin' to look out for?"

"Oh, yes, there is."

"Do you tell fortunes?"

"No. I'm looking for my little girl."

"Oh. We thought you told fortunes. What d'you want the girl for?"

"She's my daughter."

"Your daughter?"

"Yes. A little blond girl. Praskovya."

"I don't know that one is a ward. The chubby one. Look at that, she just lifted her skirt over her head. Akulina! You nasty brat. Akulina! "

"Bear children and then leave 'em with strangers," an old woman sitting near the gate muttered. "A bunch of Moscow whores runnin' around. I'd put you all against the wall and have you shot. Filthy bitches."

Women in red blouses sat in a grassy plot across from the church. One was talking.

"I was lyin' there and was afraid to oversleep, but I kept dozin' off and dozin' off. Suddenly I leaped up like I been hit. The night was real dark. I reckon I dozed off again 'cause there I was puttin' bread in the oven. It was real white, not like our rye. Ma was standin' there with her arms folded and tellin' me what wonderful bread it was and I was hurryin' to get the bread in 'cause I was scared to death that the heat in the oven would get out. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a huge, coloured pig came up and grabbed one of the loaves and ran away. I took off after it. I ran and ran but couldn't catch up with it for the life of me. I couldn't tell where we were, I just kept running through this field, stumblin' all the time 'cause there're these mounds and holes. Then that pig turned around and said: "There's nothin' for you." I looked at it and it was horrible! Teeth like this... I started shakin' all over and began to scream. That's when I woke up. My man's pokin' me in the ribs and askin' what I'm shouting about. I told granny and she said somebody close is goin' die."

"I dreamed about my dead father-in-law for the third night in a row," another woman said. "I'm sweeping out the hut and he, rest his soul, grabs my behind. I look around and ask him what he wants and he tells me to go on sweeping."

"Hey, wait, girls. Ain't that strange woman comin' this way?"

"Sure looks like her."

"Well, deary, you find your little girl yet?"

"No."

"You ought to go to the fortune-teller. There's an old

woman lives not far from here. She'll tell you where she is."

"I been to them. They promised I'd find her but I didn't. I even went to the icon of Saint Sergei the Miracle Worker two times."

"You should go to the office and ask the clerk. Come on, I'll take you," one woman said.

They left.

"God knows, I got my troubles, too," her guide said. "Nine children. You know how they get dirty. I can't even keep 'em in shirts. Wait here, I'll ask the men."

The men stood in a crowd between the tavern and the rural district offices. Their conversation was as follows:

"That's how it is."

"Right you are! "

"Hey, soldier, what have you got to say?"

"Who, me?" the soldier spoke up.

"Yea. You! "

The soldier put his arms on his hips and frowned.

"You been beyond the Danube River?" he asked.

"No."

"Then you and me got nothing to talk about."

One drunken peasant stood in the middle of the street and bowed to another, saying:

"You are our Father and we are your children. Be merciful, Father! "

Another looked at the women.

"What's this? Sluts walkin' around here."

"I am merciful! " the drunk shouted.

"Get out of here, you bitches."

There were other peasants sitting on the porch of the rural district office. The women went over to them.

"Where is Stepan Yegorych?" the village woman asked.

"What do you want him for?"

"She wants to ask him about her girl."

"I reckon Stepan Yegorych is lying drunk somewhere. Or maybe he's at the elder's."

"You the woman lookin' for a little girl?" the blacksmith asked.

"Yes, my daughter."

"You need her soon?"

The woman cheered up.

"The sooner the better. I really..."

"You're a quick one, you are."

The men burst out laughing.

The woman headed for the village elder's house. At that moment, the clerk was there sitting at the table.

"They can't do a thing without me. Am I right?"

"You're right," the elder answered, cracking nuts on the bench with a stone.

"I said to him: 'Your Honour, allow me to take a holiday,' and he said: 'You son of a bitch, I'll give you a holiday you'll never forget.' "

"Stepan Yegorych, a woman is asking for you," the elder's wife said.

"What woman?"

"I don't know her."

"Send her here."

The woman entered the room.

"What do you want?" the elder said, putting the stone on the window sill.

"Good day," the woman said, bowing.

"What do you want?"

"I've come to see Your Honour."

"We're not blind. We see you've to see 'Our Honour'. What's your business," the clerk asked.

The woman layed her hand on her cheek, looked from the elder to the clerk, blinked back her tears, and threw herself at their feet.

"Talk plainly! Why throw yourself on the floor?" the clerk said.

The woman rose to her knees.

"My child was given to strangers and I can't find her."

"So what can I do?"

"Could you look in your book? She's a ward."

"You're a fool. You've come at the wrong time. Don't you know it's a sin to work on a religious holiday?"

The woman bowed.

"You should know when it is proper to call," the elder said.

"You are fathers to us poor orphans," the woman whispered.

"Fathers! Maybe, but certainly not yours," the clerk said.

The elder walked over to the woman and stood swaying over her.

"You sin and expect the officials to come running at your beck and call."

The woman, still on her knees, looked up at him.

"So there," the elder added, and sat back down.

The woman stood up and began to leave.

"All right. Come to my office," the clerk said. "No getting away from the likes of you! "

"We'll forgive your stupidity," the elder concluded.

The woman left.

On the edge of the village there was an old hut with no roof and only one window. An upturned plough jutted in the air near the gate. It was dusk when the woman approached the hut and knocked at the window. Someone coughed inside.

"Who's there? Come round to the yard."

The woman opened the gate and entered the yard where sheep wandered about. There was no roof over the passage either. Sparrows hopped about among the beams overhead.

"Pull back the door," the voice from inside the hut said.

The woman tried to open it but there were no hinges and the door fell into the passage.

Inside, a sick woman covered with a coat, lay on a bench near the door.

"What'd you want?" she asked.

"The clerk said you have a little girl here," the woman answered, looking around.

"That's right. There's a little girl here. She's ailin' just like me. Sufferin' from fever. You her mother? We got her from an orph'nage. If you're her mother, take her. We got nothin' to eat ourselves."

•

The sick woman got up moaning, pulled the coat around her, and went into the passage.

"Still a long time to the new crop and we et the old before the holidays. We git by somehow, people help. The sickness is the worst. There she is. Paranya. Hey, Paranya! Your ma is here. Look! "

A three-year old girl with a high fever lay wrapped in rags on a plank in the passage. The sick woman lifted the sack which was covering the little girl and showed her to the stranger.

"Look at her. She yours?"

The little girl opened her eyes, looked at the woman in fright, and whimpered.

"I can't see in here," the woman said. "It's too dark."

"Wait, I'll carry her into the light. Paranya, get up, my little angel. I know, your head hurts," the woman said, lifting the child and carrying her outside. She sat on the steps and the woman fell on her knees next to the child and quickly examined her. The little girl lay in the sick woman's lap with her feverish head thrown back, the whites of her eyes showing, and her mouth open.

"I don't recognize her," the woman said. "Turn her over. She's got a mole on her right side."

"Let's turn you over a little," the sick woman said. "That's a good girl. Don't be afraid. Your ma brought you a cake. Don't be afraid, little one. Is it there?"

"No."

"Then I guess she ain't yours," the sick woman said, and carried the child back into the passage.

The woman stood perfectly still, looked around the courtyard, and then walked over to the door.

"Goodbye."

Suddenly she collapsed on the ground.

"My dear little girl! My darling child! " she wailed, lying on the doorstep and gripping her walking stick in both hands. Her knapsack shook and the scarf slipped from her head.

The sick woman came over to the door, watched the crying woman for several seconds, and then knelt at her side and tried to comfort her.

"Don't cry. Don't cry. It don't do no good to cry."

"I can't take anymore. I've looked for so long and I've come so far. I haven't had a thing to eat since yesterday morning."

"Wait here, I'll bring you some water," the sick woman said.

While she was gone the woman stood up, straightened her dress and retied her scarf.

"I'll be going now," she said after drinking some water.

"Where will you go?"

"I can't stay here," she said, and she set off along the same road on which she had come.

1863

Translated by Tracy Kuehn

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

(1821–1881)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky was born in Moscow. His father, a doctor at the Mariinskaya hospital for the poor, received the rank of nobleman in 1821. In 1839 he was murdered, and it was believed that his own serfs killed him for his brutal treatment of them.

In 1838 Fyodor Dostoyevsky was enrolled in the Military Engineers' School in St. Petersburg. After finishing it he entered the service as a draughtsman in the engineering department. However, a year later he resigned his army commission, convinced that his true vocation was writing.

The hand-to-mouth existence of a struggling beginner-writer gave him a first-hand acquaintance with the life of the lowest depths of St. Petersburg society—petty clerks, poor students, prostitutes, and so on. The story "Poor People" which Nikolai Nekrasov published in his "Petersburgian Collection" in 1846, instantly placed Dostoyevsky among the leading writers of the natural school.

Dostoyevsky's keen interest in ideas of socialism and social reorganisation of society, as well as his enthusiasm for the ideas of French utopian socialists, brought him into a circle of revolutionary-minded intellectuals. Together with the other members of this circle Dostoyevsky was arrested in April 1849, incarcerated in the grimmiest prison of tsarist Russia—Alexeyevsky Ravelin of the Peter and Paul Fortress—and sentenced to death. On December 22, 1849, all the men, Dostoyevsky among them, were lined up on the Semyonovsky parade-ground for the execution. A minute before fire was opened on them, their reprieve was read out. By the great mercy of His Majesty, Dostoyevsky's death sentence was commuted to four years' hard labour with a subsequent conscription to the army as a private. On December 24, 1849, Dostoyevsky was despatched to the Omsk convict prison to do hard labour. It was only in 1859, after completing his prison term and the service as a private in Semipalatinsk, that Dostoyevsky was transferred to Tver, and later allowed to return to St. Petersburg.

His impressions of prison were most fully reflected in "Notes From the House of the Dead" which Turgenev compared to Dante's "Inferno" and Herzen to Michelangelo's "Judgment Day". The years of hard labour and exile left an indelible imprint on Dostoyevsky's subsequent life and work, sharpening his responsiveness to human suffering and the plight of the "little man", and at the same time exacerbating the tragic contradictions in his world outlook.

His great novels, "Crime and Punishment" (1866), "The Idiot" (1868), "The Possessed" (1871-1872), "The Raw Youth" (1875), and "The Karamazov Brothers" (1879-1880), were landmarks in the development of Russian literature.

However, it is not just his novels for which Dostoyevsky is famed throughout the world. He was as great an innovator in the form of the short story.

"The Meek One" first appeared in the November 1876 issue of "Dnevnik pisatelya" ("The Writer's Diary"). The heroine of the story had a real-life prototype—Maria Borisova, a seamstress whose suicide was in the St. Petersburg newspapers in the first days of October, 1876. To quote one paper: "A little after 11 a.m. on September 30, Maria Borisova, a seamstress who came from Moscow, jumped to her death from the attic window of the six-storey house belonging to Ovsyannikov, at No. 20 Galernaya Street. Borisova had no kith or kin in our town, she lived by time work and lately had been often known to say that her work was ill-paid, that the money she had brought with her from Moscow was running out, and therefore she dreaded the future. On September 30, she complained of a headache, then she sat down to tea with a roll while her landlady went shopping. The landlady had barely descended the stairs when broken glass came flying into the yard, and then Borisova herself fell on the ground. People living in the wing across the yard saw Borisova smash two of the window panes, climb out on to the roof, her feet first, cross herself and, holding an icon in her hands, jump down. It was the icon of the Holy Virgin with which her parents had blessed her. Borisova was unconscious but still breathing when she was brought to hospital, and there, a few minutes later, she died."

The suicide made a tremendous impression on Dostoyevsky. He wrote: "That icon in her hands—a strange, unheard-of thing in a suicide. Apparently there was not even a murmur or a reproach: she simply could not live any longer, 'God did not wish it', and so she said a prayer and died. There are some things, however simple they may appear, which stay on your mind for a long time, they haunt you, and they even make you feel as if you were to blame. That meek soul who has destroyed herself torments my thoughts."

The hero of the story, an ex-officer who has become a pawnshop owner, is another man "from the underground". Scorned by society, he shuts himself up in his own shell, and tries to revenge himself on the people around him for the wrong he suffered, while clearly realising the baseness of his chosen form of vengeance. In the story he is the prosecutor, the defense lawyer and the defendant, who believes that only his own conscience can judge him.

"The Meek One" is one of the best works of Dostoyevsky, and it was highly acclaimed in his lifetime. Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, the great Russian satirical writer, said that there were few such gems in the whole of European literature.

THE MEEK ONE

A Fantasy

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Will my readers forgive me for offering them just a short novel on this occasion rather than a regular instalment of the *Diary*? But this short novel has really kept me busy for the best part of a month. In any case, I crave my readers' indulgence.

Now for the story itself. I have called it a fantastic story, whereas I personally consider it highly realistic. There is, however, a fantastic element in it, that is, in the very composition of the story, and this, I think, needs to be explained beforehand.

The fact is that this is neither a narrative nor a collection of notes. Imagine a husband whose wife has committed suicide only a few hours ago by jumping out of the window. Her body is laid out on the table. He is confused and has not arranged his thoughts. He is pacing his rooms, trying to understand what has happened, and "bring his thoughts to a focus". The man, it must be said, is an inveterate hypochondriac, one of those who talk to themselves. And so he is talking to himself, going over what has happened and trying to *take it all in*. Despite his seeming coherence he often contradicts himself both in his logic and his feelings. He both justifies himself and accuses her, then goes into irrelevant explanations: coarseness of heart and mind is mingled with depth of feeling. By degrees he does *take it all in* and "focuses his thoughts". A train of memories he has called up brings him at last irresistibly to the *truth*, and truth irresistibly ennobles his heart and mind. Towards the end the very tone of his narrative becomes different from its incoherent beginning. The truth is revealed to the poor man quite clearly and definitely, sufficiently for himself to see at least.

So much for the theme. The telling of the story, of

course, takes a few hours in breaks and snatches; it is disconnected in form, for he either argues with himself or addresses some unseen listener, a judge as it were. However, it is always like that in real life. If a stenographer could have listened to him and taken it all down, it would have sounded rather less smooth and finished than my account, but I do believe that the psychological sequence would have probably been the same. Now this hypothetical stenographer (whose notes I have given shape to) is what I call "fantastic" in my story. However, something of the sort has been allowed in literature before: Victor Hugo, for instance, in his masterpiece *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* resorted to almost the same medium, and though he did not bring in a stenographer he made it even less credible by assuming that a man sentenced to death was able (and had sufficient time) to make notes not only of his last day on earth, but also of his last hour and, actually, his last minute. Were it not for this fantastic situation, however, the work itself would not have been written—the most realistic and the most truthful of his books.

PART ONE

I

WHO I WAS AND WHO SHE WAS

... While she is still here it is not so bad: I can come up and look at her every minute, but they'll take her away tomorrow, and what will I do all alone then? She is in the front room now, on the table, they've put two card tables together, the coffin will be ready tomorrow, very, very white *gros de Naples*, oh, but I'm rambling... I'm walking up and down, up and down, trying to take it all in. I've been trying for six solid hours but I just cannot focus my thoughts. The thing is that I keep walking up and down, up and down... This is what happened. I shall simply give the order of events (order!). Gentlemen, I am far from being a writer, as you can see for yourselves, but never mind, I shall tell it the way I understand it. But the appalling part of it is that I do understand it all!

Well, if you want to know, or rather to begin at the beginning, she simply came to me to pawn her things in order to pay for her advertisement in *The Voice* that she was a governess seeking employment, had no objection to travelling, was willing to give private lessons, and so on and so forth. That was the very beginning, and naturally I did not single her out from among the others; she just came in like everyone else and that was that. I did single her out later, however. She was so thin, so sweetly fair, above medium height, always rather awkward with me and embarrassed as it were. (I think she was like that with all strangers, and certainly I meant as little to her as the next man, that is, taken as a man and not a pawn-broker.) The minute she received her money she would turn away and leave. She never uttered a word. While other clients argue, begging and haggling for more, but she would accept anything... I believe I'm rambling again... Oh yes, what struck me first was the things she brought: gold-plated silver ear-rings and a trashy

little locket—all worthless trinkets. She knew they were worthless, but her expression told me that to her they were precious—and indeed that was all her father and mother had left her, as I afterwards learnt. Only once did I permit myself to sneer at her things. That is, you see, I never permit myself to do it, for I am always the gentleman with my clients: reticent, polite and stern. “Stern, stern and again stern.” However, she was once presumptuous enough to bring the remnants (literally the remnants) of an old rabbit-fur jacket, and I was tempted to say something rather facetious to her. Goodness, how she had blushed! Her eyes were blue, big and dreamy, but the way they had blazed up! She did not utter a word, but picked up her “remnants” and walked out. That was when I noticed her *particularly* for the first time, and thought something of the sort about her, I mean something of a particular sort. Oh yes, I remember another impression, or rather, if you like, the main impression, the synthesis of everything: that is, that she was awfully young, she looked about fourteen. And yet she was already sixteen then, three months short of sixteen. That’s not what I was going to say, the synthesis was not that at all. She came again on the morrow. I found out afterwards that she had taken her rabbit jacket to Dobronravov and Moser, but those two accept nothing but gold, and so they would not even talk to her. I, on the other hand, once accepted a cameo from her (very third-rate too), and my own action surprised me when I thought it over: I never took anything but gold and silver either, and yet, in her case, I had stooped to a cameo. That was the second time I thought about her, I well remember.

On that occasion, that is after she had been to Moser, she brought me an amber cigar-holder, not too bad if one went in for that sort of thing, but once again of no value to us for we only deal in gold. Since this was the day following her *revolt*, I met her sternly. With me sternness means dryness. However, when I handed her the two rubles I could not desist from saying with something like peevishness: “I’m only doing it *for you*. Moser would never accept a thing like this from you.” I stressed the words *for you* particularly, and in a *particular sense* too. I was annoyed. She blushed again at this *for you*, but said nothing; she did not

throw the money back at me, but took it—that's poverty for you! Oh, how she had blushed! I had hurt her pride, I knew. When she left I suddenly asked myself: was my triumph over her really worth two rubles? Ha-ha-ha! I remember asking myself that question twice: was it worth it? was it worth it? And, laughing, I answered myself in the affirmative. I had a jolly good laugh then. There was no malice in it, however. I had a motive, my action had been intentional: I had wanted to test her, for suddenly my mind had begun to work in a certain direction about her. That was my third *particular* thought about her.

...Well, that was how it all began. Needless to say, I immediately set to finding out all about her on the quiet, and awaited her coming with particular impatience, I had a feeling that she would be back soon. When she did come I engaged her most politely in a pleasant conversation. I have not been badly brought up, you know, and I know my manners. Hm... It was then I perceived that she was gentle and meek. The gentle and the meek have poor resistance, and though they do not shed their reserve at all, they simply cannot evade a conversation: they answer curtly but answer they do, and the more you ask the more they say. The important thing is to keep it up, if you're interested, that's all. She naturally told me nothing about herself on that occasion. It was later that I found out all about *The Voice* and everything else. She had been using up her last resources on the advertisements then, wording them haughtily at first: "Governess seeking employment, no objection to travelling, state your terms by letter", and then: "willing to take any employment, teacher, companion, housekeeper, sick nurse and seamstress", etc., etc., the usual story. The advertisement was reworded by degrees of course, and finally, when she was close to despair, it actually said: "no salary expected, board only". But no, she found no employment. I decided to put her to the final test then, and picking up that day's *Voice* I pointed out to her an advertisement that said: "Young lady with no family ties seeks employment as children's governess, preferably with an elderly widower. Will take on household duties."

"There, you see, advertising this morning and most

probably securing a post by tonight! That's the way to advertise! "

She blushed and her eyes blazed up again. Turning away, she walked out at once. I liked it very much. However, I was already quite confident and bold: no one else would accept her cigar-holders. And even her cigar-holders had run out. I was right: she came back two days later looking very pale and upset—I guessed that she had had some trouble at home, and she really had. I shall explain directly what the trouble had been, but first I want to recall how I suddenly cut a figure for her benefit then and thus went up in her estimation. I did it on the spur of the moment. The thing is that she brought in that icon of hers to pawn that day (was driven to bringing, rather)... Ah, listen, listen! I shall be telling it properly now, I keep confusing everything. What I mean to say is that I want to recall it all now to the last detail, to the least little thing. I keep striving to focus my thoughts and I can't, it's all those little things, little things.

It was the icon of the Holy Virgin with the Child, an old family icon with a gold-plated silver *riza*, and the value was, say, six rubles. I could see that the icon meant a great deal to her, for she wanted to pawn it intact, without removing the *riza*. I said to her: "You'd better leave *riza* with me and take the icon home, because, after all, pawning an icon is not quite the thing."

"Why, don't your rules allow it?"

"No, it's not the rules, I only thought that perhaps for you..."

"Very well, take it off."

"Look, I shan't take it off, I'll put it in the icon case over there," I said after some thought, "with the other icons behind the icon-lamp (I've always kept one burning, ever since I first set up business). I'll simply let you have ten rubles on it."

"I don't need ten; just give me five, I shall redeem it for sure."

"Don't you want ten? The icon is worth it," I added, noticing her eyes flash again. She said nothing. I handed her the five rubles.

"Do not despise people," I said. "I've been in straits like

this myself, even worse perhaps, and if you see me thus engaged now ... it is only because of all I had gone through..."

"Revenging yourself on society, are you?" she suddenly interrupted me with this rather caustic remark which, however, had much that was guileless in it. (I mean it was innocent of guile generally, for she certainly did not distinguish me from the crowd then, and so there was almost no sting to her words.)

"Aha! " I thought. "So that's what you're like! There's evidence of character, tinged with new shades..."

"You see," I quickly put in half-jokingly and half-mysteriously, "I am part of that whole which wants to do evil but does good..."

She quickly turned on me a look of vast curiosity which was much like a child's.

"Wait a minute ... whose words are they? Where is it from? I've heard it somewhere..."

"Don't rack your brains, it was Mephistopheles presenting himself to Faust with these words. Have you read *Faust*?"

"Not... not carefully."

"In other words not at all. You ought to read it. But then I see your lips are curving scornfully again. Please do not think me so lacking in taste that I should attempt to cover up my role of pawnbroker by presenting myself to you as a Mephistopheles. A pawnbroker will always remain a pawnbroker. I know that well enough."

"You are strange, really... I didn't mean anything like that...."

She wanted to say: "I did not expect you to be an educated man." She did not say so but I knew the thought was there; she was very pleasantly surprised.

"You see," I said, "one can do good in any walk of life. I do not mean myself of course, I, for one, do nothing but evil, but then...."

"To be sure one can do good in any position," she said with a swift and understanding glance at me. "Yes, in any position," she suddenly added. Oh, how well I remember all those moments! I also want to add that when the young, our dear young people, want to say something very clever

and penetrating, their faces express all too sincerely and naïvely: "There, I'm saying something clever and penetrating to you now." This does not spring from conceit as with people like me; you can see that they value it all so highly, believe and esteem it all, and they fancy that you, too, esteem it just as much as they do. Ah, sincerity! It's their truest weapon. And in her it was so charming!

I remember it all, I have forgotten nothing. When she walked out, my mind was instantly made up. That same day I set out to conclude my investigations and find out all the remaining, current secrets of her life. I had learnt all the earlier secrets from Lukerya, a servant of theirs at the time, whom I had bribed a few days earlier. Those secrets were so shocking that I fail to understand how she could bring herself to laugh and be curious about Mephistopheles' words when her own predicament was so horrible. But that's youth for you! It was precisely this I thought of her then, with pride and joy because there was magnanimity in this as well, as much as to say: "I may be on the brink of ruin, but Goethe's great words are refulgent." Youth is always attended by magnanimity, be there ever so little of it, or be it misdirected. Of course, I mean her, her alone. The main thing was that I was already regarding her as *mine* and had no doubts of my power. Do you know it's a most delicious feeling when you're no longer in doubt.

But what am I about? If I carry on like this I'll never focus my thoughts. Oh hurry, hurry, it's all beside the point, oh heavens!

II

PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

I shall explain the "secrets" I found out about her in a word: her father and mother had died three years previously, and she was left with some shiftless aunts. To call them shiftless would be putting it too mildly. One was a widow with a large family; six children she had, each smaller than the next one. The other was a spinster, old and bad. Both were bad. Her father had been in the civil service, just

a clerk though, and his nobleman's rank was a personal award, nothing more. In short, all this was playing into my hand. I came to them from a higher world, so to say: after all, I was a retired junior captain of a splendid regiment, a nobleman by birth, a man of independent means and so on; as for the pawnshop, her aunts could feel nothing but respect for it. She had been kept in slavery by her aunts for three years, yet she had passed her school exams somewhere— she had managed to do it, escaping from her cruel drudgery to do it—and that surely proved her yearning for better and nobler things! Look, the reason I wanted to marry her... However, never mind me, that will keep.... And does it matter? She taught her aunt's children, made their clothes, and towards the end she not only had to wash for them but also scrub the floor, with lungs like hers! To put it plainly, they actually beat her and grudged her her keep. They ended up by wanting to sell her. Ugh! I'll leave out the sordid details. She told me all about it afterwards. A fat shopkeeper from next door had been watching all this for a whole year. He was no ordinary shopkeeper, for he owned two grocery shops. He had already driven two wives into the grave, and was now on the look-out for a third. "She's quiet, brought up in poverty, and I'm marrying for my orphans' sake," he reasoned. He really did have children who wanted looking after. He made his suit, he and her aunts began to make arrangements (incidentally, he was fifty), and she was in a panic. That was when she started coming to me in order to pay for her advertisements in *The Voice*. Finally, she begged her aunts to give her time to think it over, even if only a tiny moment. They agreed and granted her a moment, but only one, they refused a second, and made her life a misery. "An extra mouth to feed when we've nothing to eat ourselves." I knew all that already, and on that day, after the morning conversation, my mind was made up. In the evening the shopkeeper came to call on her, bringing a fifty-kopek pound of sweets from the shop; there she was sitting with him, while I called Lukerya out of the kitchen and told her to whisper in her ear that I was waiting at the gate and had something urgent to say to her. I was well pleased with myself. On the whole, I was awfully pleased all that day.

There and then at the gate, in Lukerya's presence, I told her—adding to her amazement at being called out by me at all—that I should be happy and honoured if... Next, I asked her not to be surprised at my manner and my proposing at the gate; I told her that I was a straightforward man and was well aware of the circumstances. And I was straightforward, that wasn't a lie. Oh, bother it... My speech was not only decent, which is proof of my good breeding, but also original, and that is the main thing. Why think it wrong to admit it? I want to judge myself and I do. I must speak *pro* and *contra* and I do. I know it's stupid, but even afterwards I delighted in recalling it; I told her straight out, without any embarrassment, that for one thing I was not particularly gifted or clever, not even particularly kind perhaps, and something of a cheap egoist (I remember that expression, it had occurred to me on my way there and I liked it), and it was quite possible that there was much that was unpleasant in me in other respects as well. I said all this with a peculiar sort of haughtiness—we all know how such things are said. It goes without saying that I had sufficient good taste to forebear listing my good points, after making a clean breast of my shortcomings: "but to make up for that I have this and that", so to say. I could see that she was terribly afraid still, but I did not tone down anything; on the contrary, seeing that she was afraid I purposely made it blunter: I told her straight out that she would have enough to eat, but as for fancy clothes, theatres and balls, there would be none of that, unless later perhaps when I had attained my goal. I was quite carried away by this sternness of mine. I added, as casually as I could, that though I was thus occupied, running a pawnshop that is, I was only striving for a goal, that there were certain circumstances... But I did have the right to say it: I really did have a goal and certain circumstances. Just a moment, gentlemen, I've hated the pawnshop all my life more than anybody else could, and though it really is absurd to talk to oneself in veiled phrases, I was really "revenging myself on society", I was, I was. I was! And so her jest that morning about my "revenging myself on society" was unfair. That is, you see, were I to tell her frankly: "Yes, I am revenging myself on society," she would have laughed the way she had done that morning,

and it would have really sounded absurd. Besides, I saw that I could play on her imagination with a vague hint here and a mysterious sentence there. What was more, I already feared nothing then; I knew that the fat shopkeeper was in any case more repulsive to her than I, and that I was her liberator. I did appreciate that, you know. Oh, man is particularly good at appreciating vile opportunities. But was it vile of me? How judge a man? Did I not love her even then?

Just a minute: I naturally did not so much as hint at being her benefactor then; oh, no, on the contrary, it was *I* who was indebted and not *she*. I actually put it in words; I couldn't help it, and it may have sounded silly because I did notice a fleeting change of expression on her face. But on the whole I was definitely the winner. Look here, once I am recalling all sordidness, let me recall the last bit of cad-dishness as well: I was standing there with this running through my mind: "I'm tall, well built, well bred, and, bragging aside, I'm not badlooking." Such were the thoughts exciting my brain. Needless to say, she said "yes", right there at the gate. But ... but I must add: she stood at the gate thinking for a long time before she said "yes". She was so lost in thought that I was about to say "Well?" but I could not keep the swagger out of my tone and said: "Well then?"

"Wait, I'm thinking."

And her sweet face was so grave, I should have been able to read it even then! But I was vexed, thinking: "Can she be choosing between me and the shopkeeper?" Oh, I did not understand anything then. I understood nothing, nothing at all. I understood nothing until today. I remember Lukerya running after me when I had turned to go, stopping me and saying with a gasp: "God will reward you, kind sir, for taking our dear miss, but don't you tell her this, she's proud."

Oh, she's proud, is she! I like proud little girls. The proud are especially good when ... well, when you no longer doubt your power over them, eh? Oh, what a vile brute I am! The pleasure it gave me! Do you know, when she was standing there at the gate thinking hard before saying "yes" to me, which I found puzzling enough, do you know what she may have been thinking in fact? "Since it's

misery here and misery there, isn't it best to choose the worst at once, that is the fat shopkeeper, let him beat me to death when he's drunk and the sooner the better." Eh? Tell me, could she have been thinking that?

But even now I don't understand it, I understand nothing even now! I have just said that she may have been thinking she should choose the worst of the two evils, that is the shopkeeper. But which one of us appeared worse to her then, the shopkeeper or I? A shopkeeper or a pawnbroker who quoted Goethe? It's quite a question. What question? Don't you understand even that much? There's your answer lying on the table, so what question could there be? And then, bother me anyway. The point is not myself at all.... Incidentally, what do I care now whether the point was myself or not? That's something I absolutely cannot solve. Perhaps I should go to bed. My head aches so...

III

THE NOBLEST OF MORTALS, THOUGH I DON'T REALLY BELIEVE IT

I could not fall asleep. How could I with that pulse throbbing in my brain. I want to take it all in, all that sordidness. Oh, sordidness! The sordidness I rescued her from then. Surely she ought to have understood and appreciated my action? I also indulged in various pleasing thoughts such as the notion that she was only sixteen while I was forty-one. This disparity fascinated me; it was gratifying, most gratifying.

I wanted our wedding to be *à l'anglaise*, that is just the two of us with two witnesses, one of whom should be Lukerya, and then straight into the train and off to Moscow perhaps (incidentally, I had some business to attend to there), to a hotel for a fortnight or so. She objected to this; she would not allow it, and I was compelled to pay courtesy calls on her aunts, the way one does on parents whose daughter one seeks in marriage. I conceded the point to her, and the aunts received their due. I went so far as to give those hags a hundred rubles each, promising more to come,

telling her nothing of all this of course, so as not to offend her with the vileness of the whole affair. The aunts instantly turned meek and mild. We also had an argument about her trousseau: she had nothing, almost literally so, but then she wanted nothing. I managed to prove to her, however, that it was not done, and I provided the trousseau, for who else would have done it? Oh, bother me. I did tell her at the time, about some of my ideas to give her an inkling at least. I was rather hasty about it perhaps. The main thing was that from the very first, though she tried to curb the impulse, she offered her love to me impetuously, welcoming me eagerly when I came to call in the evening, prattling happily (charming, innocent prattle!) about her childhood and babyhood, her parents' home, her father and mother. But I instantly dashed cold water on all that rapture of hers. It was dictated by the idea I had, you see. I responded to her transports with silence, gracious silence of course... but still, she soon grasped that we were different, and that I was an enigma. And to be an enigma was what I was striving for mostly. My whole stupid attitude was maintained for that very purpose. First and foremost—sternness. I kept it up until after the wedding. In short, even though I was satisfied then, I evolved a whole system. Oh, it took shape without any effort on my part. But then I could not have acted differently, I was compelled to evolve that system because of one extraordinary circumstance—but really, why am I piling calumny upon myself? The system was correct. No, no, listen to me, because you must know the circumstances if you are to pass judgement on a person.... Listen.

I don't know how to begin because it is all so difficult. It's difficult when one begins to plead one's own case. You see how it was; youth despises money, for instance, and so I instantly made much of money, I laid stress on money. I did it so tellingly that she grew more and more silent. She opened her great eyes wide, listened, looked, and grew silent. You see, young people are magnanimous, that is to say good young people are magnanimous and impetuous, but they lack tolerance, and the moment anything falls short of what they expect, they turn scornful. And I wanted generosity, I wanted to implant generosity right in her

heart, in her heartfelt point of view, do you see? I'll give you a vulgar example: how was I to explain my pawnshop to one such as she? I naturally did not blurt it all out to her, for then it would have appeared that I was making excuses for my pawnshop, and so I resorted to proud silence, so to say, I practically spoke in silence. I am a past master at speaking in silence. I have spent a lifetime speaking in silence, I have lived through whole dramas in silence alone with myself. Oh, but I too have known unhappiness. I have been discarded by all, discarded and forgotten, and no one, no one at all knows about it. And then for that slip of a girl to pick up that gossip about me from certain cads and to believe that she knew everything, while everything that mattered remained locked in this breast alone! I kept silent, I kept pointedly silent with her all the time until yesterday—why did I? Because of my pride. I wanted her to find out for herself, without my prompting and certainly not from the cads' stories, I wanted her *to perceive the man I was* by herself, and understand me. Since I was bringing her into my home I wanted her absolute respect. I wanted her to stand in awe of me for my sufferings—it was my due. Oh, I have always been proud, I've always wanted all or nothing. It was precisely because I rejected half-measures in happiness and wanted all that I was forced to take that attitude: "find out for yourself and appreciate my worth". Because you must agree that had I gone into explanations of my own accord, prompting her, cringing and pleading for respect, it would have been the same as begging for alms. However, why speak of all that?

It's stupid, stupid, stupid! I explained to her frankly and cruelly then (I stress the word, cruelly), in a few words, that magnanimity in the young was charming but not worth a thing. Why wasn't it? Because it was cheaply acquired, granted to them before they began to live; it was nothing but "life's first impressions" so to say, but I'd like to see them practise it first. Cheap magnanimity is always easy, laying down one's life is cheap too, because it's nothing but young blood and vigour seeking an outlet, a passionate desire to do something handsome. Oh no, try your magnanimity in a feat that is difficult, unseen and unheard, with no splendour

to it, attended instead with calumny and great sacrifice, and not a drop of glory—a feat when you, radiantly pure, are exposed as a cad before the world whereas there is no one equal to you in honesty on earth—I'd like to see you try a feat like that, but no, you would back out of it. And I—my whole life has been nothing but a feat like that. She argued with me at first, oh, so hotly, and then she began to say less, grew completely silent and only opened her eyes terribly wide listening to me, such big observant eyes. And... and what was more, I suddenly caught a smile upon her face, a mistrustful, silent, bad smile. She wore that smile when I brought her into my home. It's also true that she had nowhere else to go....

IX

PLANS, NOTHING BUT PLANS

Which of us two had started it first?

Neither. It all started of itself at the very outset. I have already told you that I affected sternness when I brought her into my home, but I toned it down immediately. She had it explained to her before the wedding that she would take my place in the pawnshop, accepting things in pawn and handing out the money, and she had made no objection then (note this). What is more, she actually tackled the job with zeal. Well, naturally, the rooms and the furniture all remained unchanged. There were two rooms: one was the large front room with the pawnshop partitioned off, and the other, also large, was our room—bed- and living-room. The furniture was poor; even her aunts' was better. My icon-stand with the icon-lamp was in the front room where the pawnshop was; in the other I had my bookcase with a few books in it, my chest in which I kept the keys, and then the bed, tables and chairs, of course. I told her before the wedding that I was allowing a ruble a day and no more for our food, that is, hers, mine and Lukerya's whom I enticed away from the aunts; I explained that I had to save thirty thousand in three years, and this was the only way to do it. She raised no objection, but I increased the allowance by

thirty kopeks of my own accord. It was the same with the theatre. I told her before the wedding that there would be no theatre-going, and yet I went and allowed it once a month, decently too, in stalls. We went three times and saw the *Pursuit of Happiness* and *Singing Birds*, I think it was. (Oh, bother it, bother it!) We went in silence and returned in silence. But why, why did we affect silence from the very first? There were no quarrels at first, you know, but still we were silent. In the beginning I remember, she had a way of glancing at me stealthily; the moment I noticed it I stressed our silence. It's true that it was I who overdid the silence, and not she. As for her, she had one or two outbursts when she threw herself into my arms; but since the outbursts were morbid and hysterical, while I wanted solid happiness, respectful on her part, I responded coldly. And I was quite right, for these outbursts were inevitably followed by a quarrel the next day.

That is, there were no quarrels, but silence again, and more and more insolence in her expression. "Revolt and independence" was what it implied, only she did not know how to go about it. Yes, her meek expression took on more and more insolence. Truly, I was becoming loathsome to her; I made a study of it, you know. And then of course there was no doubt that her outbursts carried her away. For instance, how could she suddenly start sneering at our poverty after the filth and misery she had come from, floor scrubbing and everything? You must see that it was not poverty, but thrift, and where necessary there was even luxury—in linen, for instance, and cleanliness. I had always imagined that cleanliness in a husband appealed to a wife. It was not poverty she scoffed at, however, but my alleged stinginess. "So he has a goal, has he, he's showing off his strength of character." She suddenly cancelled out theatre-going herself. And her scornful expression grew more and more pronounced ... and I *intensified my silence*.

After all, why make excuses for myself? The crux of the matter lay in the pawnshop. But look here, I knew that a woman, a sixteen-year-old girl at that, could not help becoming completely subjugated to a man's will. There is no originality in women, that's self-evident; it's evident to me even now. What if she is lying on the table there? Truth is

truth and even Mill himself could do nothing about it. And a loving woman, oh, a loving woman will idolise the vices, even the crimes, of the man she loves. He himself would never think of such excuses for his crimes as she will find for him. It's magnanimous but not original. It's lack of originality alone that has been the undoing of women. What of it, I repeat, what if you do point to that on the table over there? Why, is there any originality in that which is on the table? O-o-o!

Listen: I was certain of her love then. She did come flying to me and threw herself on my neck, didn't she? Therefore she loved me, or rather—she wanted to love. Yes, that was it: she wanted to love, longed for someone to love. What is more, there was no such crime in evidence here for which she would have had to find excuses. A pawnbroker, you say, and everyone says. What if I am a pawnbroker? Obviously, there must be reasons why the most magnanimous of men had become a pawnbroker. You see, gentlemen, there are certain ideas ... that is, you see, certain ideas which, if put into words, would sound terribly stupid. You'd shrink with shame. Why? Just so. Because we all are rotten and cannot stand the truth, or I don't know why else. I have just said "the most magnanimous of men". It sounds funny, and yet it really was so. It's the truth, you know, the most truthful truth. Yes, *I had the right* then to want to have some security and to open this pawnshop. "You have cast me aside, you—that is people—have driven me away with your scornful silence. When, passionately impulsive, I appealed to you, you reciprocated with an insult to last me a lifetime. And therefore I am justified in walling myself in away from you, saving my thirty thousand rubles and ending my days in the Crimea somewhere, on the south coast, in the mountains and vineyards, on my own estate bought with this thirty thousand, and what is more, away from all of you, but without bearing you malice, carrying an unblemished ideal in my soul, with the woman I love close to my heart, and a family—God willing—spending my days in helping the neighbouring villagers." It's all right, of course, saying all this about myself now, but would it not have been the utmost folly to have enlarged upon this out loud to her then? Therefore the proud silence,

that's why we lived in silence. Could she have understood? Sixteen, youth's awakening—what could she have made of all my excuses, my sufferings? Straightforwardness, no worldly wisdom, youth's cheap convictions, purblindness of "noble hearts", but the deciding factor in this was the pawnshop and there you are! (But was I a villain in my pawnshop? Did she not see the way I ran it? Did I ever drive unfair bargains?) Oh, how terrible truth is in this world! This darling, this meek one, this heavenly one—she was a tyrant who cruelly tormented my soul. I would be wronging myself if I did not say that. Do you think I did not love her? Who is there to say that I did not love her? You see, it was a wicked irony of fate and nature. We are the accursed, altogether there is a curse on the life of men (mine particularly). I do understand now that I had been wrong somewhere. Something went wrong somewhere. It had all been clear, my plan was as clear as the skies: "Stern and proud, a man who has no need of anyone's moral support or consolation and is suffering in silence." It really was so. No, I wasn't shamming, I wasn't! "She would see for herself afterwards that there was magnanimity in this, only she had failed to notice it, and then, when she did see it, she would appreciate it ten-fold and, clasping her hands to her breast in entreaty, would be reduced to dust." So much for my plan. But there must have been something I had left out of account or had forgotten to do. There was something I ought to have done there and did not. But enough, enough. And whose forgiveness should I beg now? Once it's over, it's done with. Courage, man, think of your pride! You are not to blame!

Very well, I shall speak the truth, I shall not shrink from facing the truth: *she* was to blame, *she* was to blame!

V

THE MEEK ONE REVOLTS

Our quarrels began with her suddenly taking it into her head to determine the loans in her own way, overvaluing the

things brought in pawn, and once or twice actually treating me to an argument on the subject. I stood my ground. And then this captain's widow turned up.

An old woman, a captain's widow, came to pawn a locket, her late husband's gift, the usual sort of souvenir. I gave her thirty rubles. She began to whimper and whine begging me not to let it go—well, of course, I shouldn't. Suddenly, five days later, she came back bringing a bracelet that wasn't worth eight rubles as a substitute; I refused, quite naturally. My wife's eyes must have told her something because she came again when I was out and had her locket exchanged for the bracelet.

On learning of it the same day, I spoke to my wife gently, but firmly and reasonably. She was sitting on the bed, staring at the floor and tapping the rug with her right foot (a habit of hers); an evil smile hovered on her lips. And then, without raising my voice at all, I calmly told her that the money was *mine*, that I had the right to *my own* point of view, and that I had concealed nothing from her as she should share my home.

All at once she leapt up, shaking all over, and—would you believe it—suddenly began to stamp her feet at me. She was a wild beast; it was a fit; she was a wild beast in a fit. I was speechless with amazement: an outburst like that I had never expected. But I did not lose my presence of mind; I did not so much as stir, and once again, in the same calm voice, I told her straight out that I would not allow her to take part in my business forthwith. She laughed in my face and walked out of the flat.

The point of this is that she had no right to leave the flat. Not a step without me, I had made that condition before the wedding. She came back towards evening: I did not say a word.

Early next morning she went out again, and the following day again. I locked up my pawnshop and went to see her aunts. I had severed all relations with them immediately after the wedding, neither receiving them nor calling on them. I was only to learn that she had not been there. They heard me out with great curiosity and then laughed straight into my face. "Serves you right," they said. But I was expecting their laughter. I lost no time in bribing the

younger aunt, the spinster, with a hundred rubles, and paid her twenty-five in advance. Two days later she came to me and said: "There's an officer, Yefimovich by name, mixed up in this, a lieutenant in your old regiment. "I was astonished. This Yefimovich had done me the most harm in my regiment, and about a month ago he had the impudence to come into my pawnshop, not once but twice, pretending he was a client, and I remember him chatting and laughing with my wife. I went up to him at once and told him not to dare come back again in view of what had passed between us; but nothing of *that* sort occurred to me then, I simply thought he was brazen-faced, that's all. And now her aunt informed me that she had already made a rendezvous with him, and that all this business was in the hands of a certain Yulia Samsonovna, an old friend of the aunts, a widow, and a colonel's widow at that. "It's to her your wife keeps running now," I was told.

I shall make this part short. It cost me all of three hundred rubles, but it was arranged that two days later, when my wife was to have her first intimate rendezvous with Yefimovich, I would be standing behind the door into the next room and listening to what they said. In the meantime, the day before the rendezvous, we had a scene which though brief was of extreme significance to me.

She came home in the evening, sat down on the bed and, tapping the rug with her foot, turned a mocking stare at me. Suddenly, as I looked at her, it struck me that all that last month, or rather all that last fortnight, she had not been herself at all; I should even say the exact opposite of herself: a violent creature, aggressive, I should not exactly say shameless, yet an unbalanced creature eager for turmoil. A creature asking for turmoil. Her meekness, however, stood in the way. When one of her kind goes wild you can see, even though she has overstepped all limits, that she is merely forcing herself to it, urging herself on, and that she herself is fighting a losing battle against her chastity and shame. That is why the meek are sometimes liable to overstep the limits, so much so that one's intelligence denies belief of what one has witnessed. A woman with whom depravity is a habit will, on the contrary, invariably tone down the outburst, making it fouler but maintaining a guise of decency

which aspires to unchallenged supremacy over you.

"Is it true that you were kicked out of your regiment because you were too much of a coward to fight a duel?" she suddenly asked me, her eyes flashing.

"It is. The officers' court requested me to leave the regiment, but actually I had already sent in my papers before that."

"They kicked you out for a coward! "

"Yes, their verdict said I was a coward. But I had refused to fight that duel not because I was a coward but because I had not wanted to obey their despotic verdict and challenge someone to a duel when I did not consider myself insulted. I assure you," I couldn't hold back the words, "that defying such tyranny, and accepting all the ensuing consequences, took much more courage than fighting any duel in the world."

I couldn't hold back the words and they sounded as if I were trying to justify myself. This new humiliation of mine was just what she wanted. She laughed with malice.

"And is it true that you tramped the streets of St. Petersburg for three years after that, begging for alms and sleeping under billiard tables at night?"

"I've taken shelter both in Sennaya Square and in the Vyazemsky Doss House.* Yes, it's true: after the regiment

* *The Vyazemsky Doss House*. A doss house in Sennaya Street. This is what contemporaries wrote about it: "It may be said without exaggeration that this house is a breeding-ground and abode of every kind of ugliness to which a man, oppressed by poverty and ignorance, can be reduced. Just one glance at this house chills the blood. The stone three-storey gallery built round the house has no windows opening on to it, just large holes without window frames, panes or even jambs, and, what is more, the most smelly things are kept there. Seen through these crumbling window-holes are narrow, incredibly filthy and dark slits of rooms, that are more like passages dug out in a quarry. The yard in front of the house is packed with a great number of open garbage holes, which it is impossible to approach because of the putrid stench. And living here, in this hell-hole, at the present time are about seven thousand people, ragged, filthy people who seem never to have seen a comb or a piece of soap in their lives, and most of whom are eternally drunk. One imagines that there is no such crime which the inmates of this house would not be capable of. The thought is prompted by their very look: the filthiness of their rags, the matted hair, the grimy faces, and their wild glances which cause an outsider to shudder from horror..."

I suffered much disgrace and degradation, but never moral degradation, because I myself was the first to deplore my actions even then. It was merely a degradation of my will and mind, for which my desperate position alone was responsible. But it's over...."

"Oh yes, you're a personage now—a financier! "

That was an allusion to the pawnshop. But I was quick to take myself in hand. I could see that she was longing for more explanations, humiliating to me, and so I did not give her the pleasure. A client came in most opportunely just then, and I left her to attend to him. It must have been an hour later that she suddenly appeared dressed for the street and, coming up to me, said:

"And yet you told me nothing of this before the wedding, did you?"

I made no reply, and she walked out.

And so, on the following day, there I was standing behind the door into the next room, listening to my fate being decided. There was a revolver in my pocket. She was sitting at the table, dressed up for the rendezvous and Yefimovich was posing and mincing in front of her. What happened then? Why, it all happened precisely the way I had imagined and supposed it would happen (and I am proud to admit it), although I was not aware at the time that I was imagining or supposing it. I don't know whether I'm making myself clear.

This is what happened. I stood listening for a whole hour; for a whole hour I was present at a duel between the noblest and purest of women and a society cad, lecherous and obtuse, with the soul of a reptile. Where, I thought in amazement, where had that naïve, meek and reticent creature learned all that? The wittiest of authors could not have conceived for his comedy of manners this scene of taunting remarks, the most naïve of laughter, and virtue's holy contempt for vice. And what brilliance of speech and repartee, what quickness of wit, what truth in her condemnation of him! And at the same time what a world of really girlish artlessness! She laughed in his face at his protestations of love, his gestures and his proposals. He had come unprepared for any resistance to his crude attack and now he seemed to become deflated. I may have thought at

first that it was sheer coquetry on her part: "coquetry of a depraved but sharp-witted creature, to set a higher value on herself". But no, the truth stood out, radiant like the sun, and there was no room left for doubt. Only her assumed and rash hatred for me could have driven her, inexperienced as she was, to arrange this rendezvous, but when it came to the point the veil had instantly dropped from her eyes. She was simply casting about for a way to insult me with whatever means she had, but the sordidness of what she had set out to do had repelled her. And could one as immaculate and innocent, one who cherished an ideal, be attracted to Yefimovich or any other society rotter? He only made her laugh at him. All that was sterling in her soul was roused, and indignation called forth sarcasm from her heart. I repeat that towards the end the buffoon was completely dazed and sat there scowling and hardly able to make a reply; I was even afraid that he might dare insult her out of a low desire for vengeance. I repeat once more: I'm proud to say that I heard out this scene practically unamazed. It was like encountering something I already knew. It was as if I had expressly gone there to encounter it. I went there believing nothing, none of the accusations, although I did put a revolver in my pocket, but it is the truth. Could I have thought of her differently? Why did I love her then, why did I hold her so dear, why had I married her then? Oh yes, of course, that scene more than convinced me of her purity. I put an abrupt end to the scene by opening the door. Yefimovich jumped to his feet, I took her by the hand and invited her to come with me. Yefimovich collected his wits together and suddenly gave a peal of ringing laughter.

"Oh, I would not encroach upon the holy ties of matrimony! Take her away, take her away! And do you know," he shouted after me, "even though a decent man should not fight a duel with you, with all due respect for your lady I'm at your service... That is, of course, if you would risk it..."

"Did you hear that?" I held her back for a moment in the door. After that I uttered not another sound all the way home. I led her by the hand, and she made no resistance. Rather the contrary; she was terribly impressed, but only

until we reached home. Once there, she sat down on a chair and stared at me fixedly. She was exceedingly pale; though her lips instantly curved in a sneer, her look was now solemn and rigidly defiant. I think she sincerely believed during those first few moments that I was going to shoot her with my revolver. But I drew it out of my pocket without a word and placed it on the table. She stared both at me and the revolver. (Note this: she was already familiar with the revolver. I had bought and loaded it the day I opened my pawnshop. I had decided against keeping great watchdogs or a powerful footman, the way Moser does, for instance. My cook admits the clients. I keep a loaded revolver handy because in our trade one simply must have something to defend oneself with, just in case. When she first came into my house she was very curious about the revolver: I explained to her the way it worked and, moreover, once persuaded her to shoot at a target. Note all this.) Ignoring her frightened look, I lay down on the bed, half-undressed. I felt quite spent; it was already close on eleven. She sat on without moving for about an hour, then blew out the candle and without undressing lay down too, on the sofa, close to the wall. It was the first time that she did not come to bed with me—note that as well....

VI

A HORRIBLE MEMORY

And now that horrible memory....

When I woke up in the morning it must have been some time after seven for the room was almost light. I was wide awake at once, with all my senses alert. I opened my eyes. She was standing in front of the table, holding the revolver. She did not know that I was awake and watching her. And suddenly I saw her coming towards me, revolver in hand, I quickly closed my eyes pretending I was fast asleep.

She came to the bed and stood over me. I heard everything: dead silence reigned in the room, but I heard the silence. One nervous twitch, and I was compelled to open

my eyes against my will. She was looking straight down at me, straight into my eyes, and the revolver was already close to my temple. Our glances met. But the look we exchanged lasted less than a second. I forced myself to close my eyes again, resolving on the instant with all the strength my soul possessed not to stir again or open my eyes no matter what awaited me.

It does happen sometimes that a man, though fast asleep, opens his eyes suddenly, even raises his head for a second and looks about the room, then lays it on the pillow again, without waking up, and sleeps on without remembering anything. Since I had suddenly closed my eyes again and remained as motionless as one fast asleep after meeting her glance and seeing the revolver at my temple, she could certainly assume that I was indeed asleep and had seen nothing; besides, it was more than incredible that I should have closed my eyes again at a moment *like that*, having seen what I had seen.

Yes, it was incredible. Still, she may have guessed the truth—this flashed through my mind in the same fleeting instant. Oh, the whirl of thoughts and feelings that flashed across my mind in less than a fleeting instant, and praise be to the electricity of human thought! In that case (I felt) if she has guessed the truth and knows that I am not asleep, she will be crushed by my readiness to meet death and now, perhaps, her hand will falter. Her earlier resolve will be shattered, perhaps, by this new, astonishing revelation. They say that looking down from a great height one is drawn irresistibly into the abyss at one's feet. I believe that many suicides and murders are actually committed simply because a revolver has already been picked up. It is just another abyss, a 45-degree slope which one cannot help sliding down, and an indomitable something compels one to pull the trigger. However, the awareness that I had seen everything, knew everything, and was silently awaiting death at her hand, would perhaps save her from slipping down the slope.

The silence continued, and suddenly I felt the cold touch of steel on my temple, close to my hair. Was I definitely hopeful that I would escape, you will ask. I shall answer you as in the presence of God: I did not entertain a shred

of hope—my chances were one in a hundred perhaps. Why was I accepting death then? And now it's my turn to ask you: what use was life to me when a revolver had been pointed at me by the one I adored? Besides, I knew with all the power of my being that the moment meant a fight for supremacy between us, a terrifying life and death duel, a duel fought by that same coward of yesterday who had been thrown out by his comrades for cowardice. I knew it and so did she, that is to say, if she was aware that I was not asleep.

Perhaps there was none of this or perhaps I did not even have those thoughts at the time, but still it all must have been so, be it subconsciously, for I did nothing but think of it afterwards every hour of my life.

You will ask me again: why did I not save her from committing a crime? Oh, I asked myself that very question thousands of times afterwards, every time I recalled that moment with an icy shiver running down my spine. But then my soul was steeped in gloomy despair. I was perishing, so how could I save anyone? How do you know whether I wanted to save anyone at the time or not? Who knows what I may have been feeling then?

My senses were astir, however: seconds passed, there was dead silence; still she stood over me, and suddenly I trembled with hope. I quickly opened my eyes. She was no longer in the room, I got up from the bed; I had won and she was vanquished for ever!

I came out for breakfast. We always had our breakfast served in the front room, and she always poured out the tea herself. I sat down in silence and took the glass she handed me. I looked at her after five minutes or so. She was dreadfully pale, even paler than the night before, and she was looking at me. And suddenly, when she saw that I was looking at her, her pale lips quivered in a pale smile, and her eyes asked a timid question. I thought: "So she is still in doubt and wondering: does he know? Did he see?" I looked away indifferently. After breakfast, I locked the shop and went to the market-place where I bought an iron bedstead and screen. On return I had the bed placed in the front room and screened off. The bed was to be hers, but I did not say a word to her. Words were superfluous, for the bed

told her that *I had seen everything and knew all*, and that there was no longer any doubt. When I went to bed, I left the revolver on the table as usual. That night she silently lay down in her new bed: our marriage was dissolved, she was "vanquished but not pardoned". She was delirious during the night, and acute fever set in towards morning. She was ill for six weeks.

PART TWO

I

PRIDE'S DREAM

Lukerya has just told me that she will not stay with me and will leave as soon as the mistress is buried. I have been praying on my knees for five minutes, whereas I wanted to pray for an hour, but thoughts are thronging my mind, all of them sick thoughts, and my mind is sick—so what's the use of praying ... it's sinful, that's all. It is also strange that I do not feel sleepy; when a disaster, a great disaster befalls one, one always wants to go to sleep after the first, most violent paroxysms of grief are over. Men sentenced to death are said to sleep most soundly on their last night. But that's only right; it's nature, otherwise one could not endure it, I lay down on the sofa but I did not fall asleep....

...During the six weeks she was ill we nursed her day and night. Lukerya and I, and a trained hospital nurse I had hired. I spared no expense, and I even enjoyed spending money on her. I called in Dr. Schroeder and paid him ten rubles a visit. When she recovered consciousness I tried to keep out of her sight. However, why describe it? When she was up and about again, she came into my room and mutely and silently sat down at a table apart, which I had also bought for her at the time. Yes, it's true, we said nothing to one another; that is, we did begin to talk later on, but it was trivial talk. My taciturnity was intentional, of course, but I very well saw that she, too, was glad she did not have to say too much. I thought it quite natural of her. "She is utterly overwhelmed and vanquished," I thought, "so naturally she must be given a chance to forget and adjust herself." And so we lived in silence, but I spent every minute of mine in preparing myself for the future. I thought she was doing the same, and I enjoyed myself tremendously trying to guess just what she was thinking about then.

Another thing: no one knows, of course, the anguish

I went through, bemoaning her as she lay ill. But I bemoaned her in silence and stifled the moans in my breast so that even Lukerya should not hear. I would not think of it, I could not even imagine her dying without learning everything. And yet, when her life was no longer in danger and she began to recover, I very quickly and effectually regained my peace of mind, I remember that well. More than that, I decided to *postpone our future* for as long as possible, and meantime carry on with the present state of affairs. Yes, a very strange and peculiar thing happened to me then, I do not know what else to call it: I had triumphed over her, and awareness of it alone seemed to satisfy me completely. And that is how we spent the whole winter. Oh yes, I was satisfied, more satisfied than I had ever been, and it went on all winter.

You see, there was one horrible circumstance in my life which had until then, that is until the day of the catastrophe with my wife, been weighing down on me, every day, every hour, and that was—the loss of my good name and my discharge from the regiment. To put it briefly, I had been the victim of despotic unfairness. It is true that my comrades had disliked me because I was difficult to get on with or perhaps because I seemed funny, but then you know how it is sometimes: a thing you hold dear, cherish and revere, unaccountably evokes laughter from a crowd of your comrades. Oh, no one ever liked me, not even at school. I was disliked everywhere and always. Even Lukerya does not like me. And though dislike for me lay at the root of what had happened in the regiment, the upshot was undoubtedly a chance thing. I am mentioning this because nothing could be more aggravating and intolerable than being ruined through mere blind chance, through an unfortunate sum of circumstances which might well have dispersed like clouds. It is humiliating for a creature of intelligence. This is what happened.

One night, at the theatre, I had gone into the buffet during the interval between acts. A certain hussar, A. by name, walked in and in a very loud voice began to tell two other hussar friends of his, for all the other officers and people present to hear, that Captain Bezumtsev of our regiment had been making trouble in the corridor and was

“apparently drunk”. The others did not pick up the conversation, and then it was not true anyway, because Captain Bezumtsev was not drunk and the trouble was not any trouble at all. The hussars began to talk of something else and so the matter ended, but by the next morning the story had filtered into our regiment and all our officers immediately began to say that I, the only man of our regiment present when A. spoke so insolently of Captain Bezumtsev, ought to have gone up to him and silenced him with a reprimand. But for what earthly reason? If he bore Bezumtsev a grudge, it was their own private affair, and why should I meddle? It now appeared to the officers that it was not a private affair but one that concerned the whole regiment, and since I had been its only representative there the other officers and people could have taken my attitude as proof of our regiment tolerating officers who were not over-scrupulous about their own honour or their regiment’s. I could not agree with their reasoning. I was told that I could still set matters right even at this late date by formally challenging A. I refused to do so, and being annoyed, I refused haughtily. After that I sent in my papers at once, and that was the long and the short of the story. I had retained my pride but I was crushed in spirit. I lost my will and my power of reasoning. It so happened just then that my sister’s husband in Moscow had finished squandering the little capital we had, including my own share, a tiny share, it’s true, but it left me penniless and homeless. I could have taken on a post, but I did not: I could not see myself donning a railwayman’s coat after the splendour of my uniform. And so—if it had to be shame, let it be shame; if it had to be disgrace, let it be disgrace; if it had to be degradation, let it, the lower the better—such was my choice. My recollections of the next three years are grim, they even include the Vyazemsky House for the destitute. A year and a half ago my godmother, a rich old woman, died in Moscow and quite unexpectedly remembered me in her will among others, bequeathing me three thousand rubles. I thought matters over and decided my fate there and then. I decided on the pawnshop because that way I would not ever have to make excuses for my past. Money, a home, and a new life away from my old memories—such was my plan.

Nevertheless, my gloomy past and the irretrievable loss of my honour and good name tormented me every hour, every minute. And then I married. Was it chance or not, I do not know. However, when I brought her into my home I thought I was bringing in a friend, for I wanted a friend very badly. I clearly saw, however, that the friend had to be prepared, shaped and even vanquished first. And could I have explained anything to that prejudiced sixteen-year-old child without preliminaries? For instance, if it had not been for the horrible catastrophe with the revolver and the help it so opportunely rendered, could I have proved to her that I was no coward and that my regiment had unfairly accused me of cowardice? The catastrophe had been well-timed. My self-control at the point of the revolver was my revenge for all my gloomy past. And though no one else would ever know about it, *she* did, and that meant everything to me, for she herself meant everything to me, all the hope my future held for me in my dreams! She was the only person I was preparing for myself, there was no one else I wanted at all—and now she knew everything: at least she knew that she had been unduly hasty in joining the ranks of my enemies. This thought delighted me. She could no longer think me a cad, just strange perhaps, but even this thought did not really displease me after what had occurred: queerness is not a vice, rather the reverse, for it sometimes appeals to women. In short, I put off the denouement purposely: what had taken place was more than enough for my peace of mind for the moment, and provided a wealth of visions and material to weave into my dreams. The trouble with me is that I am a dreamer: I had a sufficiency of material, and as for her I thought she could *wait*.

So the winter passed, in expectation of something. I enjoyed stealing glances at her as she sat at her table. She did needlework in the daytime, and in the evenings she sometimes read, taking the books out of my bookcase. My choice of books should have spoken well for me too. She hardly ever went out. I used to take her for a walk every day after dinner before it grew dark, and we would take a stroll but not as silently, however, as before. I tried to make it appear that we were talking pleasantly and were not silent, but, as I have already said before, neither of us

wanted to be too expansive. It was intentional on my part, but as for her I thought she had to be "given time". It's curious, of course, that it had never once occurred to me until the very end of the winter that while I enjoyed stealing looks at her I had never, in all this time, caught her looking at me. I thought it was timidity. Besides, she looked so timidly meek, so weak after her illness. No, I thought, I'd better bide my time, and suddenly "one day she'll come to me herself."

This thought had an irresistible fascination for me. I will add that occasionally I could not help working myself up and actually bringing my spirit and mind to a point where I seemed to feel wronged by her. This would last for some time on every occasion. But never was hatred able to ripen and take root in my heart. I myself felt that it was really nothing but a game. And never, never could I think of her as a criminal, not even when I broke our marriage by buying her the bed and screen. And it was not because I judged her crime with flippancy; no, it was because I had the intention of forgiving her completely from the very first, even before buying the bed. In short, it was not like me because I am a stern judge of morals. She seemed to me so vanquished, so humbled and crushed that I pitied her poignantly at times, albeit I positively liked the thought of her humiliation. I liked the idea of this inequality of ours.

I happened to do several good deeds that winter. I took the opportunity to cancel two debts and give one poor woman a loan without taking anything in pawn. I told my wife nothing about it, and the thought that she'd find out was not at the back of my mind when I did it. But the woman came in to thank me, she all but knelt before me. And so she found out; I fancied she was really pleased to learn about the woman.

Spring was approaching, it was already the middle of April, the winter frames were taken out of the windows and the sun lit up our silent rooms in bright clusters of rays. But the veil hung over my eyes and blinded my reason. That fatal, terrible veil! I do not know how it came about, but the veil dropped suddenly, and all at once I saw and understood everything. Was it chance, was it the

ultimate day, or had a sunbeam fired my dulled brain to thought and understanding? No, it was neither thought nor understanding, it was a certain nerve which had all but died away, suddenly stirring and twitching back to life, lighting up the whole of my dulled soul and my devilish pride. It was like a jolt. And it did happen suddenly and unexpectedly. It happened before sunset, at about five in the afternoon...

II

THE VEIL DROPPED SUDDENLY

A word or two before I go on. I noticed a strange pensiveness in her one day a month before; it was not just silence, but pensiveness now. That, also, I noticed suddenly. She had been sitting with her head bent low over her sewing, and she did not know that I was watching her. And then, all at once, it struck me that she had grown so thin and frail, her face was so pale and her lips so bloodless—all this, together with her pensiveness, gave me a frightful shock. I had heard her dry little cough before, at night mostly. I got up at once and without telling her anything went out to call Dr. Schroeder.

The doctor came the next day. She was very much surprised and kept glancing from Dr. Schroeder to me and back again.

"But I'm quite well, " she said with a vague little smile.

Schroeder did not give her a very thorough examination (these medical men are sometimes conceitedly careless), all he said to me in the other room was that it was the after-effect of her illness, and that when spring came it would not be a bad idea to go down to the sea or, if that could not be done, to simply move into the country. In short, he told me nothing except that it was weakness or something like that. When the doctor left, she gave me a frightfully serious look and said:

"I'm quite, quite well."

Saying this she suddenly blushed, apparently with shame. It must have been shame. Oh, I understand it all now: it shamed her that I, who was still *her husband*, was

worrying about her as if I were still her real husband. But I failed to understand it then and put her blush down to humility. (The veil!)

And then, a month after that, in April, at about five in the afternoon of a bright, sunny day, I was sitting at my desk, doing my accounts. She was sewing at her own table in our room, and all of a sudden I heard her ... singing, very, very softly. The novelty of it had a staggering effect on me, which I cannot explain to this day. Until then I had hardly ever heard her sing, except perhaps in the very beginning, when I first brought her into my home and we could still amuse ourselves by practising target shots. She had a rather strong and ringing voice then, and though not very true it had a very pleasant and healthy sound. Her singing was so pathetic now—oh, it wasn't a sad song (it was some romance or other), but there was something sickly and broken in her voice, as if it could not cope with the song, as if the song itself was sick. She sang in an undertone, and on a high note her voice broke off—such a poor little voice and it broke off so pathetically; she cleared her throat and took the song up again, very, very softly.

People may laugh at my agitation, but no one will ever understand why I was so agitated. No, I felt no pity for her yet; it was something entirely different. At first, at the very first at least, I was puzzled and terribly surprised, terribly and strangely, the feeling was unwholesome and almost vengeful. "What, singing! And in my presence! *Can she have forgotten about me?*"

I remained where I was, quite overwhelmed, then I got up, took my hat and walked out, without knowing what I was about. That is, I did not know where I was going and why. In the hall, Lukerya helped me into my overcoat.

"Does she sing?" I found myself asking Lukerya. She did not understand, and stared at me without understanding me; however, I was really difficult to understand then.

"Is this the first time that she is singing?"

"No, she sings sometimes when you are out," Lukerya replied.

I remember everything. I walked downstairs and went out of the house and started aimlessly down the street. I came to the corner and stood there, staring into space. People

walked past me and jostled me, but I was insensitive to it. I called a cab and told the man to take me to Police Bridge, I don't know why. All at once I changed my mind and gave him a twenty-kopek tip.

"That's for your trouble," I said, smiling at him stupidly, a strange rapture surging in my heart.

I turned homeward, hurrying my step. That poor little broken note suddenly rang in my soul again. It took my breath away. The veil was dropping; it was dropping, dropping. Her breaking into song in my presence meant that she had forgotten about me—that's what was so clear and frightening. My heart knew it. But my soul was filled with rapture, and it was stronger than fear.

Oh, the irony of fate! Why, I must have carried this rapture in my soul all winter; there could have been nothing else in it, but then where had I myself been all winter? Had I been at one with my soul? I ran up the stairs in my impatience, but I can't tell whether I went in timidly or not. All I remember is that the floor seemed to sway, as if I were floating down a river. I walked into the room, she was sitting sewing, with her head bent as before, but she no longer sang. She gave me a fleeting, incurious glance, but it wasn't a glance, it was just a reflex, natural and meaningless, when someone comes into the room.

I came straight up to her and sat close beside her, I was like one crazed. She looked at me quickly with something like panic; I took her hand, I don't remember what I said to her, or rather what I had meant to say, because I could not even speak properly then. I could not master my breaking voice. But then I did not know what to say, I just gasped.

"Let's talk ... d'you know ... say something," I mumbled something as inane as this, but oh, could I be sensible then? She trembled again and recoiled from me, terrified, staring into my face, and suddenly the expression in her eyes changed to *stern amazement*. Yes, it was amazement and it was *stern*. She looked at me wide-eyed. Her stern expression, her stern amazement dealt me a crushing blow. "So you want love as well, do you? Love?" this amazement of hers seemed to ask, although she said not a word. But I read it all in her face, all. My whole being was shaken, and I fell at her feet. Yes, I fell at her feet. She jumped up

quickly, but I gripped both her hands with all my strength, and held her there.

Oh, I was aware of my desperation, so well aware! But would you believe it, the surge of rapture in my heart was so overpowering, that I thought I would die. I kissed her feet in rapture and happiness. Yes, in happiness, which knew no bounds or measure, and this in spite of my awareness of how little hope there was for me in my despair. I wept and I tried to say something, but words failed me. Suddenly her fright and amazement gave way to an expression of anxiety, a dire question, and she now looked at me queerly, wildly even, there was something she was impatient to understand, and she smiled. She was terribly ashamed that I was kissing her feet and she pulled them away, but I quickly kissed floor where her feet had stood. She saw it and suddenly began to laugh because she was ashamed (you know how one laughs when one is ashamed). She was becoming hysterical, I saw; her hands were twitching—but I did not give it a thought and went on muttering to her that I loved her, that I would not get up from my knees. "Let me kiss the hem of your gown... let me worship you like this all my life...." I don't know, I don't remember—she suddenly burst into sobs and began to shake; she had a dreadful fit of hysterics. I had frightened her.

I carried her to her bed. When the fit passed, she sat up, looking terribly stricken, and, clutching my hands, begged me to calm down. "Come, don't torment yourself so, come!" and began to cry again. I did not leave her side all that evening, telling her I would take her to Boulogne, to the seaside, I would take her there now, at once, in a fortnight; I told her she had such a broken little voice, I had heard it that day; I would close my pawnshop, I'd sell it to Dobronravov, everything would begin anew, but the main thing was Boulogne, Boulogne. She listened and was still frightened. She grew more and more frightened. But what mattered to me mostly was not this, but that I wanted more and more irresistibly to fall at her feet again, and go on kissing the floor her feet had touched, and worship her. "I shall ask nothing, nothing more of you," I kept repeating, "do not answer me, ignore me, just let me look at you from afar, make me your thing, your dog..." She wept.

"And I thought you'd leave me like that," the words escaped her so involuntarily that perhaps she was not even aware of having said them, and yet they were the most momentous and fatal words, the meaning of which was more inexorably clear to me than anything else that evening and which was like a knife thrust at my heart. It explained everything to me, everything, but while she was there beside me, while I could look at her, hope carried me away irresistibly and I was terribly happy. Oh, I tired her out completely that evening, I knew it, but the thought that was with me all the time was that I'd make everything different at once. Finally, towards nightfall, she seemed quite spent and I begged her to try to fall asleep, which she did, immediately and soundly. I was afraid she would be delirious; she was, but very slightly. I kept coming up to her almost every minute, I tiptoed to her in my slippers and looked at her. I wrung my hands in anguish looking down on that poor, sick creature in her wretched cot, that three-ruble iron bed I had bought for her. I knelt beside her, but I dared not kiss her feet while she slept (not against her will!). I knelt before the icons to pray, but jumped up again. Lukerya kept an eye on me, coming in from the kitchen every now and again. I went out to her and told her to go to bed, that beginning tomorrow everything would be *quite different*.

And I did believe it, blindly, madly, and terribly. Oh, the elation that flooded my being! All I wanted was for tomorrow to come. I refused to admit misfortune, despite the symptoms. Although the veil had dropped, reason had not returned entirely to me then, and it did not for a very, very long time, not until today, it only returned today. But then how could it have returned earlier? She was alive, she was there before me and I was beside her. "When she awakes I'll tell her all this, and she'll see everything." Such was my reasoning then, simple and clear, and therefore I was elated. The trip to Boulogne was uppermost in my mind. For some reason I imagined that Boulogne meant everything, that Boulogne held the key to something conclusive. "To Boulogne, to Boulogne!" I was madly impatient for morning to come.

III

I UNDERSTAND TOO WELL

To think that it was only a few days ago, five days, only five days ago—last Tuesday! No, no, if only I had a little more time, if only she had waited a bit, I would have dispelled the gloom, and she had calmed down, yes, she had! The very next day she listened to what I said with already a smile on her lips, in spite of her perplexity... Her perplexity, or was it shamefacedness, was the main thing about her then, all those five days through. She was also afraid, very much afraid. I am not denying it. I shall make no crazy contradictions: she was afraid, but then how could she help being afraid? We had become strangers to one another such a long time ago, had become so unused to one another, and now suddenly all this.... However, I ignored her fear, for I was dazzled by the vision of our new life! ... It is true, it is indisputably true, that I made a mistake. There may have been more than one mistake. As early as the following day (it was Wednesday), the moment she woke up I immediately made a mistake: I suddenly made her my friend. I was hasty, much too hasty, but I had the need to confess, it was essential that I should—and it was much more than a confession. I concealed from her nothing at all. I told her frankly that all that winter I had been confident of her love and had entertained no other thought. I made it clear to her that the pawnshop had been nothing more than my loss of will-power and reason, my own personal idea of self-flagellation and self-glorification. I told her that I had really been a coward in the buffet that day because of my oversensitiveness: the situation made me shrink, the thought made me shrink that supposing I suddenly stepped forward would it not appear foolish? It was not the duel that frightened me, but the thought of appearing foolish. It had been too late to admit it afterwards, and so I made everyone suffer, I made her suffer for it too, and that was why I married her to make her suffer for it. Altogether I spoke as in a fever most of the time. She took my hands in hers of her own accord and begged me to stop. "You are exag-

gerating... you are tormenting yourself," and then she began to cry again, and again it ended in something like a fit. She kept imploring me to tell her nothing of this, and not to recall things.

I took little or no heed of her pleas: the spring, Boulogne! Our sun, our new sun was there! I could talk of nothing else. I closed my pawnshop, and handed over the business to Dobronravov. Then I suddenly asked her if she would not like us to give away all we had to the poor, all except the original capital of three thousand left me by my god-mother which we could spend on our trip to Boulogne, and on return to begin life anew, working for our living. That's what we decided upon, because she said nothing ... but merely smiled. And it must have been her tact prompting that smile more than anything else, so that I should not feel hurt. I did see that I was irksome to her, please don't think that I was too stupid or too selfish not to see it. I saw everything, everything to the least trifle, I saw and understood it all perfectly; my despair was utter and unconcealed.

I talked about myself and about her. About Lukerya too. I told her that I had wept.... I used to change the conversation too, trying to keep her from recalling certain things. And she did brighten up once or twice; I remember it, I do! Why do you say that I looked and saw nothing? If only *this* had not happened, everything would have been resurrected. Because she told me yesterday, when we talked about literature and the books she had read that winter—she did speak of that scene of Gil Blas with the archbishop of Granada, laughing at the recollection. And her laughter had been so sweet and innocent, exactly like before when she was my fiancée (oh, fleeting moment!); and I was so glad! However, her telling me about the archbishop struck me forcibly: it meant that she had been untroubled and happy enough in her loneliness that winter to enjoy a masterpiece. It meant that she had been already becoming quite easy in her mind, that she had been coming to believe that I would leave her *like that*. "I thought you'd leave me *like that*," was what she said to me that Tuesday. Oh, it was a thought worthy of a ten-year-old girl! And she did believe in it, she did believe

that everything would really be *like that*: she at her table, I at mine, and the two of us going on like that till the age of sixty. And all of a sudden, there I was, coming to her, a husband, and a husband who wanted love! What a misunderstanding, what blindness on my part!

Another mistake of mine was that I gazed at her enraptured. I should have held my emotion in check, for rapture frightened her. But you know, I did hold my emotion in check, I did not kiss her feet any more. I never once hinted that I was ... well, that I was a husband. Oh, nothing could have been further from my thoughts, all I did was to worship. But I could not remain completely mute, I could not help saying something! I suddenly went and told her that I enjoyed her conversation tremendously and considered her incomparably better read and educated than myself. She blushed a bright red and shyly told me I was exaggerating. And then, fool that I am, I blurted out to her how much I had admired her when, standing behind the door that day, I had listened to her duel, to her innocence duelling with that brute, how much I had admired her intellect, her brilliant wit, blended with such childlike artlessness. A shudder seemed to run through her, again she murmured that I was exaggerating, but suddenly a shadow crossed her face, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Well, it was more than I could stand: I fell on my knees before her again and began to kiss her feet again, and once again it all ended in a fit of hysterics, the way it had last Tuesday. This happened last night, and in the morning....

In the morning? Oh madman, that morning was today, only a short while ago, so short a while!

Listen and try to understand: when we met at breakfast this morning (after last night's fit, mind you) she quite amazed me by her composure, do you see? And I had stayed awake all night, trembling with fear because of what had passed between us the evening before. And there she was suddenly coming straight up to me, stopping in front of me with her hands clasped in entreaty (only a while ago, a while ago!) and saying to me that she was a criminal and knew it, that her crime had tormented her all

winter, that it was tormenting her even then ... that she appreciated my magnanimity too well and that "I shall be a faithful wife to you, I shall respect you". I leapt to my feet and embraced her madly. I kissed her; I kissed her face, her lips, like a husband would kiss his wife after a long separation. And why did I ever go out then. I was only away for two hours ... to visa our passports... Oh God! If I had only come back five minutes earlier, only five minutes... That crowd at our gate, the stares they gave me... Oh God!

Lukerya says (oh, I shall never let Lukerya go now, she knows everything, for she was with us all winter, she'll be telling me all about it), Lukerya says that after I had gone out and only some twenty minutes before my return, she went into our room to ask her mistress something, I don't remember what, and saw that her icon (that icon of the Holy Virgin) had been taken down from the wall and was standing in front of her on the table, as if the mistress had just been praying. "Mistress, dear!" Lukerya had cried. "It's nothing, Lukerya, go. Oh wait, Lukerya," she had said, and coming up to Lukerya had kissed her. "Are you happy, mistress?" Lukerya had asked. "Yes, Lukerya." "Master ought to have come and begged your forgiveness long before this... Thank the Lord, you've made it up now..." And then she had smiled a very strange smile and said: "Good, Lukerya. Go now, Lukerya." So strange had that smile been that ten minutes later Lukerya went back to take another look at her. "There she was standing against the wall, close to the window, her head pressed to her arm that was propped against the wall, standing there and thinking, she was. She was so lost in thought that she never heard me come in and stand in the door watching her. It seemed to me that she was smiling, standing there, thinking and smiling. I took another look at her, turned and tiptoed away, thinking these thoughts the while, when suddenly I heard her opening the window. I hurried back to warn her it was chilly and she might catch cold, when suddenly I saw her getting up on the window-sill, and there she was standing at full height in the open window with her back to me and the icon in her hands. My heart just sank. 'Mistress! Mistress!' I cried. She heard me, made as if to turn to me,

but she did not turn. She took a step, clutched the icon to her breast and—jumped out of the window! ”

All I remember is that when I walked into the gate the body was still warm. And all of them staring at me. They had all been shouting, but now, suddenly, they fell silent and made way for me—and she, she was there on the ground with the icon. I remember as through a black haze coming up silently and looking down at her for a long time. All the people crowded round me, saying something to me. Lukerya was there, but I did not see her. She says that she spoke to me. I only remember that tradesman: he kept shouting to me that “she had bled a handful through the mouth, a handful, a handful! ” and showed me the blood on the cobblestones in front of me. I believe I touched the blood with my finger, there was a smear on my finger and I stared at it (I remember that), while he kept on shouting: “A handful, a handful! ”

“What is a handful, what?” I screamed at the top of my voice, they say, raised my arms and rushed at him...

Oh, it's crazy, crazy! It's a misunderstanding! Incredible! Impossible!

IV

JUST FIVE MINUTES LATE

Isn't it? Isn't it incredible? Could anyone say that a thing like that was possible? Why, why did that woman die?

Oh, believe me when I say that I do understand; but why did she have to die? This still remains a question. She was frightened by my love; she had asked herself earnestly should she accept it or not, but the question had been more than she could endure, and she chose death. I know, I know, it's no use racking my brains: she had given too many promises, she was afraid she could not keep them. That's clear. There are certain considerations here too horrible to contemplate.

Why, why did she die? The question remains. The question is hammering, hammering at my brain. I would have left her *like that* had she wished it, had she wanted every-

thing to be left *like that*. She did not believe I would, that's what it was! No, no, I am lying, it was not that at all. It was simply that with me it had to be in all honesty, to love me in all ways if she loved me at all, and not as she would have loved that shopkeeper. And since she was too chaste and pure to agree to the sort of love demanded by the shopkeeper, she could not bring herself to deceive me. She refused to deceive me with a half-love, or a quarter-love, disguised as true love. She was too honest, that was it. And I was going to implant generosity into her heart once, remember? An absurd thought.

I am most curious to know whether or not she respected me. I don't know whether or not she despised me. I do not think she despised me. Strange, isn't it, that it never once occurred to me in all those winter months that she despised me! I had been quite convinced of the opposite until the moment she looked at me with that *stern amazement*. *Stern* it was, indeed. It was then it suddenly dawned on me that she despised me. I understood it, irrevocably, for ever and ever. Ah, what if she did despise me, despised me for the rest of her life if only she had remained alive! She was moving about and talking only a little while ago. How could she jump out of the window? It's beyond my understanding. And could I have suspected it even five minutes ago? I summoned Lukerya. I'll never let Lukerya go now, not for anything in the world.

Oh, we could have come to an understanding yet. We had only become terribly estranged from one another during the winter, but surely we could have grown into the habit again? Why shouldn't we have been able to become friends and start life anew? I am magnanimous and so was she—there's one link for you. Only a few more words, two days, no more, and she would have understood everything.

The pity of it is that it was sheer accident—an ordinary, cruel and senseless accident. That's the pity of it! Five minutes, I was just five minutes late! Had I come back five minutes earlier, that moment would have flashed past like a cloud, never to enter her head again. And it would have all ended in her understanding everything. But now, there are empty rooms again, and I all alone. There's

the pendulum swinging and clicking without the least concern or pity for anything. There's no one—that's the misery of it.

I keep pacing up and down, up and down. I know, I know without your prompting; you think it funny that I'm putting the blame on an accident and being five minutes late. But it is obvious. Consider this: she did not even leave a note to say that she was taking her own life, the way everybody does. Surely it would have occurred to her that suspicion might fall on Lukerya: "You were alone with her, so you went and pushed her," so to say. Though guiltless, they would have certainly dragged her through the courts, if not for those four people down in the yard who said they saw her, either from their windows in the wing or from the yard below, standing up on the window-sill with the icon in her hands and then jumping down. But it was also sheer chance, you know, those people being there and seeing it. No, it was nothing but a moment, an unaccountable moment. Impulse and imagination! What if she has been sitting there and praying? It does not necessarily mean a prayer before death. The whole moment may have lasted no more than ten minutes; she may have formed the resolve within that very minute when she stood against the wall, resting her head on her arm and smiling. The idea had flashed across her mind, sending it into a whirl, and she had not been able to withstand it.

It was a misunderstanding, that's obvious, whatever you say. I was not beyond living with. Could it have been anaemia, I wonder? Perhaps it was just her anaemia, a sapping of vitality? That winter had worn her out, that's what it was....

I came too late! ! !

How small and thin she looks in her coffin, how sharp her nose! Her eyelashes are like tiny arrows on her cheeks. And the way she fell—nothing broken, nothing smashed. Only that one "handful of blood". A dessert spoon, that is. Internal haemorrhage. A queer thought: supposing she did not have to be buried? Because if they take her away ... then... oh no, it's almost impossible to let her be taken away. I do realise, of course, that they'll have to take her away, I am neither mad nor raving; on the contrary,

my reason has never before been so lucid—but how can it be: no one in the house again; again those two rooms, and I alone in my pawnshop! I'm raving, raving, this is raving indeed! I made her suffer too much, that's the reason.

What do I care for your laws now? What use have I for your customs, your morals, your world, your country, your creed? Let your judge sit in judgement over me, let them take me to court, your public court, and I shall say that I defy everything. The judge will shout: "I order silence, Officer!" And I shall shout back: "What power have you now to make me obey? Why did procrastination wreck what was dearest to me? What good will your laws do me now? I am withdrawing from you all!" Oh, I don't care!

She's blind, blind! She's dead, she cannot hear. You do not know that I would have built a paradise for you to dwell in. For I had a paradise in my heart, and I would have lavished it on you. Granted you would not have given me your love—never mind, what of it? Everything would have remained *like that*, it would have gone on being *like that*. You would have spoken to me as to a friend; we would have delighted in our talks and laughed together, looking happily into each other's eyes, that's all. And that's how it would have been. And even if you came to love another, why—never mind, never mind! You would have walked along with him and smiled, while I would have looked at you from across the street.... Oh, never mind anything, if only she would open her eyes just once! For one single moment, just one! If she would only look at me the way she had done earlier today when she stood before me and swore to be a faithful wife to me! Oh, in that single glance she would have understood everything.

Procrastination! Oh, nature! People are alone on this planet, that's the trouble. "Is there a living soul in this field?" cries the hero of a Russian legend. Though no legendary hero, I make the same call, but no one responds. They say the sun gives life to the universe. But the sun rises and—look—isn't it dead? Everything is dead, the dead lie everywhere. Just solitary people, and all about—silence. That's

the kind of world we live in. "People, love one another"—who said that? Whose commandment is it? The pendulum is clicking unfeelingly, horridly. It's two in the morning. Her shoes are standing beside her bed, as though waiting for her... Now, seriously, they'll take her away tomorrow, and whatever shall I do?

*1876**Translated by Olga Shartse*

VSEVOLOD GARSHIN

(1855–1888)

Vsevolod Garshin was born into a good family of modest means living in the provinces.

In 1877, at the outset of the war against Turkey for the liberation of the Balkan Slavs, Garshin dropped out of the Mining Institute in St. Petersburg and joined up as a volunteer. The story "Four Days" which made Garshin famous, was inspired by his immediate impressions of the war, shown as a state unnatural and inimical to man.

Vladimir Korolenko, a celebrated Russian author, compared Prince Andrei in Tolstoy's "War and Peace" with the hero of Garshin's story. He wrote: "Prince Andrei, wounded in battle, also gazes into the blue sky and also indulges in meditation. But the mood in Garshin's story is entirely different. Prince Andrei becomes absorbed in contemplating the mysterious blue, remote and impenetrable. The world no longer exists for him, he is wholly engrossed by the mystery of this serene infiniteness. In any case, this mystery is so infinitely remote from life's cares that there is no room in it for problems of human relationships. Garshin's hero also gazes at the sky, but he is thinking along entirely different lines. For him the sky is simply a

natural phenomenon, something blue flashing between the branches and leaves, while all his thoughts revolve agonisingly within the bounds of that small world accessible to him in the centre of which lies and rots the man he has killed. He does not want to solve any infinite mysteries, he is painfully trying to understand the right or wrong of his own situation: "I have killed him. What for?" As critic G. Byaly aptly put it, Garshin's hero "is a man whose conscience has been staggered, and whose mind has been grieved. Only such people are capable of pitting themselves against the world of violence and seek a way out, worthy of man, from life's grim blind alleys."

The heroes of Garshin's stories take the burning questions of the day as close to heart as if they were their own personal concern. There is a kinship between Garshin and Turgenev in this passionate concern for the fate of the country. In 1880 Turgenev wrote to Garshin: "Every ageing writer who sincerely loves his work is happy when he discovers that he has heirs. You are one of them."

Early death cut short the development of this many-faceted talent. The last thing Garshin wrote was a jolly tale for children: "A Frog Goes Travelling."

FOUR DAYS

I remember running through the woods, forcing our way through the hawthorn bushes, while the bullets whizzed around us, snapping off branches. The shooting became heavier. Red flashes spurted here and there on the edge of the wood. Sidorov, a young soldier of Company One ("What is he doing in our skirmish line?" I found myself wondering), suddenly slumped down on the ground and looked back at me in silence with great frightened eyes. Blood trickled from his mouth. Yes, I remember that clearly. I also remember how, in the dense undergrowth, within almost a stone's throw from the edge of the wood, I first saw *him*. He was a huge fat Turk, but I went straight for him, weak and thin though I was. There was a report, and something flew past me, something enormous, it seemed to me; there was a ringing in my ears. "He is shooting at me," came the thought. With a scream of terror he recoiled against a thick hawthorn bush. He could have gone round it, but in his fear he did not know what he was doing and flung himself upon the prickly branches. I struck out, and knocked the rifle out of his hands, then struck again and felt my bayonet sinking into something soft. There was a queer sound, something between a snarl and a groan. Then I ran on. Our men were shouting "hurrah! ", dropping, shooting. I remember firing several shots after I had come out of the woods into a clearing. Suddenly the cheers sounded louder and we all moved forward again. I should have said "our men" instead of "we", because I was left behind. I thought it rather odd. Still more odd was it when all of a sudden everything disappeared, and all the shouting and the shooting were silenced. I heard nothing, and saw only a patch of blue; it must have been the sky. Then that went too.

I have never been in such a queer position before. I am lying, I believe, on my stomach, and see nothing in front of me but a small patch of earth. A few blades of grass, an ant crawling down along one of them, bits of rubbish from last year's grass—that is my whole world. And I see it with only one eye, as the other one is pressed hard up against something—no doubt the branch on which my head is resting. I am terribly uncomfortable, and want to shift my position, and simply can't understand why I am not able to do so. Time passes. I hear the chirr of grasshoppers, the hum of bees. Not a sound more. At last, with an effort, I disengage my right arm from under my body, and pushing away from the ground with both hands, I make an effort to get up on my knees.

A pain, intense and swift as lightning, shoots through my whole body from knees to chest and head, and I fall back. Again darkness, a void.

I wake up. Why do I see the stars shining so brightly in the blue-black Bulgarian sky? Am I not in my tent? What made me crawl out of it? I make a movement and feel an excruciating pain in the legs.

Yes, I have been wounded. Is it dangerous or not? Both my right and left legs are clotted with blood. When I touch them the pain gets worse. It's like a toothache—a continuous gnawing pain. There is a ringing in my ears, and my head is weighted with lead. Dimly I realize that I have been hit in both legs. What's the matter? Why didn't they pick me up? Have the Turks beaten us? I begin to recollect what happened to me, at first vaguely, then ever more clearly, and come to the conclusion that we have not been beaten at all. Because I dropped (I do not actually remember that, but I do remember everyone running forward while I wasn't able to, and being left behind with something blue before my eyes)—I dropped in the clearing, just on top of the mound. Our little battalion commander had pointed out that clearing to us. "Make for that, boys!" he had cried in his ringing voice. And we had made it, so we could not have been defeated. Then why hadn't they picked me up? It was an open spot here, they could not have

missed me. Besides, I probably wasn't the only one lying there. They had been shooting so rapidly. I must turn my head and have a look. I can do that more comfortable now, because when I had come to myself that time and seen the ant on the blade of grass crawling along head downwards, I had tried to get up and had dropped again not in my former position but on my back. That's why I can see the stars.

I raise myself and sit up. It's a hard thing to do with both my legs crippled. I had almost given it up in despair, but managed it at last with tears of pain springing to my eyes.

Overhead is a bit of blue-black sky with a big star and several small ones shining in it surrounded by something dark and tall. It's the bushes. I'm in the undergrowth—they have overlooked me!

I can feel the roots of my hair crawling on my head.

But what could I be doing in the undergrowth when I was wounded in the clearing? I must have crawled over here dazed with pain. The odd part about it is I cannot stir a limb now, while before I had been able to drag myself over to these bushes. Perhaps I had been hit only once then, and the second bullet had got me here.

Faint pink circles began to swim before my eyes. The big star faded and some of the smaller ones vanished. It was the moon rising. How good it was at home now!

Strange sounds reach my ears. It's like someone moaning. Yes, it's a moan. Is it someone else lying next to me overlooked, someone with crippled legs or a bullet in his stomach? No, the moans sound so near, but there doesn't seem to be anyone near me... My God, why, it's me myself! Low piteous moans; is the pain really as bad as that? It must be. Only I do not realize it, my head is so leaden and clouded. I had better lie down again and go to sleep—to sleep, sleep... Would I ever wake up, though? Who cares.

Just as I am preparing to lie down a broad pale strip of moonlight clearly illumines the place where I am lying, and I see something dark and big lying within five paces of me. The moon picks out bright spots on it here and there. These are buttons or accoutrement. It's a dead body or a wounded man.

I don't care what it is—I'm going to lie down...

No, it cannot be! Our men could not have retreated. They are here, they have driven back the Turks and are holding these positions. Then why is there no murmur of talk, no crackle of camp-fires? It must be that I am too weak to hear anything. They must be here, I am sure.

"Help! Help! "

Wild, hoarse, frantic cries burst from my throat, but remain unanswered. They resound loudly in the night air. All else is silence. Only the grasshoppers keep up their ceaseless chirp. The round face of the moon looks down on me sorrowfully.

If *he* were wounded he would have come to from such a cry. It is a corpse. One of ours or a Turk? Ah, my God! What difference does it make? And sleep descends upon my burning eyes.

I lie with closed eyes, although I have long been awake. I do not want to open them, as I can feel the sunlight through my closed eyelids; if I open them the glare of the sun will hurt. And I had better not move either. Yesterday (was it yesterday?) I was wounded; a day has passed; more days will pass, and I shall die. Who cares. I had better not stir. Let my body lie still. If only I could stop my brain working, too! But nothing can check it. Thoughts and memories throng in my head. That is not for long, though; soon the end will come. All that will remain will be a few lines in the newspapers saying that we had sustained few casualties—so many wounded, volunteer Private Ivanov killed. They will not even write the name; just—one killed. One private, like that wretched little dog.

A vivid scene leaps to my mind. It was long ago; but then my whole life, *that* life I had lived before I lay here with shot up legs, was so long ago... I was walking down the street, and the sight of a crowd of people made me stop. They were standing in silence, looking at a bleeding ball of white that was whimpering piteously. It was a pretty little dog that had been run over by a horse tram. It was dying, as I am now. A janitor pushed through the crowd,

picked the dog up by the scruff of its neck and carried it away. The crowd dispersed.

Would someone carry me away? No, I am to lie here and die. And how beautiful life is! That day (when the accident occurred to the dog) I was happy. I walked along drunk with joy, and had good reason to be. Ah, aching memories, leave me alone, do not torment me! The joy that was, the anguish that is ... let the anguish alone remain; it is easier to bear that memories which compel comparisons. Ah, what agony! You are worse than wounds!

It is becoming hot, though. The sun is blazing. I open my eyes and see the same bushes, the same sky, only now in daylight. And there is my neighbour. It's a Turk, a corpse. What a huge man! I know him, it's that same man...

Before me lies the man I have killed. What did I kill him for?

He lies there dead and gory. What fate had cast him here? Who is he? Perhaps he, too, like me, has an old mother. How long will she sit on the doorstep of her squalid little clay hut in the evenings, looking northward to see whether her beloved son, her breadwinner and worker, is coming home?

And I? And I too... I would gladly change places with him. How happy he must be not to hear anything, not to feel the pain of his wounds, nor the deadly anguish, nor the thirst... The bayonet had pierced him to the heart. There was a big black hole in his uniform with blood round it. *I had done that.*

I had not meant to. I had had no grudge against any one when I went to fight. The thought that I would have to kill anybody had not occurred to me somehow. I had merely seen *myself* putting *my own* chest out to meet the bullets. And I had gone and done so.

And now what? Ah, fool, fool! And this poor fellow (he was wearing Egyptian uniform)—he was still less to blame. Until they were packed into a steamer like herrings in a barrel and shipped to Constantinople, he had never heard of Russia or of Bulgaria. He had been told to go, so he had gone. If he had not he would have been bastinadoed, or some pasha perhaps would have shot him

down with a revolver. He had made the long and gruelling march from Istanbul to Ruschuk. We had attacked, he had defended himself. But seeing what formidable men we were—men who had kept pushing on and on in face of his patented English Peabody-Martini rifle—terror had struck his heart. And when he had wanted to retreat, some little fellow, whom he could have killed with one blow of his dark fist, had rushed at him and plunged his bayonet into his heart.

Was it his fault?

Was it my fault, for that matter, although I did kill him? This thirst is terrible. Thirst! Who knows what that word means! Even when we were going through Rumania, marching fifty versts a day under a terrific heat of over a hundred degrees, I had never felt what I am feeling now. Ah, I wish somebody would come!

My God! Why, he must have some water in that huge flask of his! Now can I get to it, though. At what cost? But get to it I must.

I begin to crawl. My legs drag, my weakened arms barely push my inert body forward. The corpse lies within fifteen feet of me, but for me this is more—not more, but worse—than fifteen miles. But crawl up to it I must. My throat burns. Besides, you'll only die quicker without water. As it is, you stand some chance.

And I crawl forward. My legs drag over the ground, and every movement is agony. I scream, scream and weep with pain, but crawl on. At last I reach the body. There is the flask... it has water in it—a lot of water! It must be at least half full. Oh, that water will last me a long time—it will last me till I die!

You are saving my life, my poor victim! Leaning on one elbow, I begin to unstrap the flask, when suddenly I lose my balance and fall face downward on my saviour's chest. He is beginning to give off a strong smell of putrefaction.

I drink my fill. The water is tepid, but it is still drinkable and there is a lot of it. It will keep me alive a few more days. I remember reading in *The Physiology of Everyday Life* that a man could live without food for over a week so

long as he had water. It gave the story of a suicide who had killed himself by starvation. It had taken him a long time to kill himself because he had had water to drink.

What of it? What if I do live another five or six days? Our men have retreated, the Bulgarians have run away. There is no road nearby. All the same I'll die. Only instead of three days' agony I have given myself a week. Would it not be better to put an end to it? Next to my neighbour lies his rifle, an excellent English fire-arm. I need only stretch my hand out; then—in a flash—it will all be over. The cartridges lie there, too, all in a heap. He had not had time to use them up.

Well, should I get done with it, or wait? Wait for what? Rescue? Death? Wait until the Turks come and start flaying me, stripping the skin off my wounded legs? Better to put an end to it myself.

But I must not lose heart; I must hold on, fight till my last ounce of strength. If they find me, I am saved. Perhaps my bones are uninjured; they will patch me up. I'll see my country, my mother, Masha...

God, don't let them learn the whole truth! Let them think I was killed on the spot. What will happen to them when they find out that I had been suffering for two, three, four days!

I feel dizzy; that journey to my neighbour has taken it out of me. And that horrible smell, too. How black he has gone... What will he be like tomorrow or the day after? I am lying here only because I haven't the strength to drag myself away. I'll have a rest and crawl back to my old place; the wind, by the way, is blowing from that direction and will carry the stink away from me.

I am lying utterly exhausted. The sun is burning my face and hands. I have nothing to cover myself up with. I wish it were night already; it will be the second, I believe.

My thoughts wander, and I drop off.

I slept a long time, because when I woke up it was already night. Everything is the same; my wounds hurt, my neighbour lies there as huge and still as ever.

I can't help thinking about him. Had I given up all that

I loved, all that was dear to me, had I made this thousand-mile march out here, suffering from hunger, cold and the blazing heat, did I lie now here in such agony, merely for the sake of taking that poor man's life? What useful military objective had I achieved apart from this murder?

Murder, murderer... And who? I!

When I had decided to go and fight, my mother and Masha had not tried to dissuade me, although they had cried over me. Blinded by an idea, I had not seen those tears. I had not realized (now I do) what I had done to those I love.

What's the use of looking back now! The past is gone and done with.

And how queerly many of my acquaintances had regarded my behaviour! "The man is crazy! He doesn't know what he's letting himself in for! " How could they say that? How do such words tally with *their* notions of heroism, love of country and other such things? To *them* I was the embodiment of all those virtues. And yet they called me "crazy".

And so I went to Kishinev; I was loaded up with a knapsack and all kinds of military equipment. And I went off with thousands of others, among whom you would hardly find more than a few odd men like me, who had volunteered. The rest would have stayed at home if it had depended upon them. Yet they go as we "intelligent ones" go, marching thousands of miles and fighting just as well, if not better than we do. They perform their duties despite the fact that they would immediately drop the whole thing and go away if they only had the chance.

A keen morning wind springs up. The bushes begin to stir, and a sleepy bird takes wing. The stars grow dim. The dark-blue sky pales and becomes flecked with soft fleecy clouds; grey shadows rise from the earth. It is the third day of my... What can I call it? Life? Agony?

The third... How many more remained? At any rate very few. I had grown very weak, and I don't think I'll be able to move away from the corpse. Soon we shall be on even terms and won't be objectionable to each other.

I must have a drink. I will drink three times a day—morning, noon and evening.

The sun has risen. Its huge disk, criss-crossed with the black branches of the underbrush, is red, like blood. It is going to be hot today, I think. What is going to happen to you, neighbour? God knows you are hideous enough as it is!

Yes, he was hideous. His hair had begun to fall out. His skin, which was naturally dark, had become blanched and yellow; the bloated face had drawn it so tight that it had split behind the ear. Worms were swarming there. His booted feet were swollen, and huge blisters pushed out between the hooks. His whole body had distended enormously. What would the sun do to him today?

Lying so close to him was unbearable. I must crawl away at all cost. But could I do it? I can still lift my hand to open the flask and have a drink, but shifting my heavy, inert body? But I must move away, no matter how little—be it even at the rate of half a pace an hour.

I spend the whole of that morning moving away. The pain is bad, but what does it matter now! I no longer remember, I cannot even imagine, what the sensation of healthy man is. In fact I seem to have got used to the pain. That morning I manage, after all, to crawl away about fifteen feet, and find myself on the old spot. But I was not to enjoy the fresh air for long—if you can call it fresh air within six or seven paces of a decaying corpse. The wind has shifted round and the stench is nauseating. I have a gripping pain in the pit of my empty stomach. The fetid contaminated air keeps flowing over me in sickening waves.

In despair, I start crying...

Utterly worn out and stupefied, I lay almost unconscious. Suddenly... Could it be the fancy of an excited imagination? Hardly. Yes, it was a sound of voices. The tramp of horses' hoofs, human voices. I was about to cry out, but checked myself. What if they were Turks? What then? To these tortures would be added others more horrible, tortures the mere reading about which in the newspapers makes one's hair stand up on end. They would skin me alive, roast my wounded legs. I might even expect worse; they were so diabolically ingenious. Were it really better to end my life

in their hands than to die here? But what if they are our own men? Damn those bushes! Why have you grown all round me in such a thick wall? I can see nothing through them; only in one place a small gap between the branches allows me a glimpse of a hollow in the distance. There is a brook there, I believe—the brook from which we drank before going into battle. Yes, and there is the great slab of sandstone thrown across the brook. They will probably ride over it. The murmur of voices ceases. I cannot make out what language they are speaking—my hearing has grown weaker. God! If it's our men... I'll shout to them; they will hear me at that distance, surely. Better than running the risk of falling into the clutches of the bashibuzouks. But where are they so long? I am in an agony of suspense; I don't even smell the corpse, although the stench of it is as bad as ever.

All of a sudden I catch sight of Cossacks at the crossing of the stream! Blue uniforms, red-striped trousers, lances. Half a *sotnia* of them. At the head a black-bearded officer on a magnificent horse. No sooner had the unit crossed the stream than he turned back in his saddle and shouted: "Forward, at the trot! "

"Stop, for God's sake, stop! Help, brothers, help! " I shout, but the tramp of the heavy horses, the clatter of sabres and the noisy talk of Cossacks are louder than my hoarse cries—they do not hear me!

Damnation! Exhausted, I fall face downwards on the ground and begin to sob. I have upset the flask and from it flows the water—my life, my salvation, my respite from death. By the time I notice it there is hardly more than half a glass of water left; all the rest has drained away into the dry thirsty earth.

What words can describe the numb stupefaction that came over me after that frightful experience? I lay motionless with half-closed eyes. The wind kept shifting, now blowing fresh clean air upon me, now overpowering me with putrid whiffs. My neighbour that day had become hideous beyond description. Once, when I opened my eyes to glance at him, I was appalled. His face had gone. It had slid off the bones. The ghastly skull, fixed in the eternal grin of death, was more repulsive to me than ever before, although I had

often had occasion to handle skulls and anatomize whole heads. This skeleton in uniform with shining buttons made me shudder. "That is war," I thought, "there is its image."

Meanwhile the blazing sun beats down relentlessly. My hands and face are scorched. I have finished the rest of the water. I was suffering so keenly from thirst that I had swallowed it all in a gulp, although I had decided to take only a sip. Ah, why hadn't I shouted to the Cossacks when they were so close to me! Even if they *had* been the Turks it would still be better than this. At most they would have tortured me for an hour, or perhaps two hours; as it is I don't know how long I will have to lie here in this agony. Oh, Mother, darling! Tear your grey hair, beat your head against the wall, curse the day you gave birth to me, curse the world for having invented the scourge of war!

But you and Masha will probably never hear of the tortures I am undergoing. Farewell, Mother, farewell, my sweetheart, my love! Oh, the anguish, the pain! My heart cries out.

Again that white little dog! The janitor had had no pity for it; he had knocked its head against a wall and flung it into the dust hole. But it was still alive. It had suffered the whole day. But I am still more wretched, because I have been suffering for three whole days. Tomorrow will be the fourth, after that the fifth, then the sixth... Death, where are you? Come, come and take me!

But death does not come and does not take me. And I lie under that terrible sun with not a drop of water to cool my burning throat, while the corpse poisons the air around me. It has decomposed completely. Masses of swarming worms drop from it. When he is consumed and only his bones and uniform remain, it will be my turn. And I will be just like that.

The day passes, then the night. No change. Then comes morning. No change. Another day passes...

The bushes stir and rustle, as if holding a whispered conversation. "You will die, sure, sure, sure!" they murmur. "You'll not see, see, see!" answer the bushes from the other side.

"You can't see them here!" a loud voice sounds close by.

With a start I come to myself in an instant. The kindly blue eyes of Yakovlev, our lance-corporal, gaze upon me out of the bushes.

"Spades! " he shouts. "There are two more here—one of ours and one of theirs."

"Don't bring spades, don't bury me, I'm alive! " I want to shout, but only a faint moan escapes my parched lips.

"Good heavens! I think he's alive! Mr. Ivanov, d'you hear me, sir? Boys! Come over here, quick, the gentleman is alive! Call the surgeon! "

Half a minute later water, vodka and some other drink were being poured down my throat. Then everything disappeared.

The stretcher moves forward with a measured swing. The rhythmic movement lulls me. I come to myself and doze off again. My dressed wounds do not hurt me; a delightful languor flows through my body.

"Ha-a-alt! Lower stretchers! Relieving squad, fall in! Stretchers, up! Forward! "

These commands are being issued by Pyotr Ivanovich, our medical officer, a tall, thin, very kind-hearted man. He is so tall that by turning my eyes in his direction I can always see his head with its long straggly beard and his shoulders towering above the heads of the four tall soldiers who are carrying the stretcher on their shoulders.

"Pyotr Ivanovich! " I whisper.

"What is it, my dear boy?" he asks, bending over me.

"What did the doctor tell you, Pyotr Ivanovich? Will I die soon?"

"Die—who ever told you that! You're not going to die. All your bones are whole. You're a lucky fellow! No bones or arteries affected. I can't understand how you managed to survive these three and a half days. What did you eat?"

"Nothing."

"And drink?"

"I took the flask from the Turk. I can't talk now, Pyotr Ivanovich. I'll tell you later."

"Why, of course, my dear chap. Go to sleep."

Sleep again, oblivion...

I come to myself in the divisional hospital. Doctors and

nurses are standing over me, and among them I see the familiar face of an eminent St. Petersburg professor; he is bending over my legs. His hands are bloody. He is not long at it. Then he turns to me, saying:

“Well, you can thank your lucky stars, young man! You’re going to live. We’ve taken away one of your legs, though; but that ’s nothing. Are you able to speak?”

I was, and I told them everything I have described here.

1877

Translated by Bernard Isaacs

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

(1853—1921)

Vladimir Korolenko, a gifted writer, critic and journalist, was also a very active public figure.

Korolenko's father was a district judge in a small Ukrainian town, and was a man of broad cultural interests and exemplary honesty. His death left the family without any means, and at the age of 15 Korolenko came face to face with dire poverty. Thanks to his mother's efforts he was able to finish Grammar School and enroll in the Technological Institute in St. Petersburg. Soon afterwards Korolenko moved to Moscow to study at the Academy of Agriculture and Forestry. In 1876 he was arrested for active participation in a students' revolutionary movement and banished from Moscow. In 1879 he was arrested again for printing and circulating revolutionary appeals, and exiled. That same year he published his first story "Episodes from the Life of a Seeker".

Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by members of Narodnaya Volya on March 1, 1881. Political exiles had to sign an oath of allegiance to the new tsar. Korolenko refused. As a highly dangerous criminal he was now exiled to Siberia where he stayed for three years. It was in Siberia that he wrote his best stories: "Makar's Dream", "Murderer", and "In Bad Company", but he had no right to publish them. He kept from starving by working as a ploughman and a cobbler. In spite of the terrible odds, he continued with his cultural pursuits and made a study of the Yakuts' way of life, their folk tales and their literary creativeness.

The fame of a fighter for justice and a defender of the oppressed and wronged accompanied Korolenko all through life. His speech in defence of some Udmurt peasants, accused by the government of a ritualistic murder, received an exceptionally rousing response from the public. The accusation was based on slander, yet seven of the peasants were sentenced to hard labour. Korolenko spoke out in their defence, published a series of articles exposing the slander, and succeeded in getting the case reviewed, himself taking on the duties of defence counsel. As a result, the peasants were acquitted.

Korolenko was at his best in his short stories. He had travelled the vastness of Russia, driven as he was from one place of exile to another, and he knew the life of the people intimately. He gives a perfectly realistic description of it, without any embellishments. What he does put into his stories is his enormous love and respect for the common people.

The story "The Strange One" was written in the Vishnevol'sk prison. It could not be published at the time and was spread illegally. Korolenko held that the staunchness and courage of fighters for people's happiness combined into a moral value that could withstand any trials.

Korolenko himself was one of those staunch, courageous and just fighters.

THE STRANGE ONE*

A Story of the 1880s

I

"Is it a long way yet to a station, coachman?"

" 'Tis likely we won't reach it afore the storm. See, how the snow's a-whirlin'? The norther is upon us! "

The snowstorm is indeed drawing near. Evening has brought a sharper nip into the air. The snow cracks weirdly under the runners, and from the shadowy wood comes the howling of the harsh winter wind—the norther. Their branches jutting out toward our path, the fir-trees rock sullenly in the gathering dusk of a winter's early night.

I feel cold and uncomfortable. The sledge is narrow, bumping against my sides; the swords and pistols of the guards get in the way, while the sledge bell tinkles a long and dreary chant in tune with the rising blizzard.

But then, luckily, on the edge of the roaring forest there looms into view the light of the station-house.

And presently my two guards, with much clanging of their arsenal of arms, shake off the snow in the doorway of a dark, overheated, smoke-begrimed hut—the station-house. It is bleak and cheerless inside. The woman of the house sets a splinter of burning wood into a holder.

"Is there anything to eat, woman?"

"Nothing in the house."

"Fish? You've a river nearby."

"What fish we had, the otter ate."

"Surely potatoes..."

"Nay, good sirs, this year's potatoes have all been nipped by the frost."

That was that—but happily enough a samovar turned up. The tea made us warm, and the woman brought in some bread and onions in a bast-basket. Outdoors the storm gathered force, powdery snow lashed against the window

panes, and the flame in the lamp shuddered fitfully.

The woman says, "Stay the night—you can't start out in weather like that."

"Very well, we'll stay," replies one of the guards. "You are in no hurry either, sir? You see what these parts are like, and where you're going, trust my word, 'tis e'en worse."

There now fell a silence on the hut. The woman of the house, too, folded the spindle with the yarn, blew out the light, and retired. Gloom and hush reigned, broken only by the wild pounding of the wind.

I could not sleep. As though precipitated by the bluster of the storm, there rushed into my mind one dismal thought after another.

The same gendarme who spoke before inquired politely: "Not asleep, sir?" He was the senior of the two, a likeable man, with a pleasant, even somewhat refined face. Prompt and proficient at his job, he could afford to be less rigid, and thus dispense with needless restrictions and formalities.

"No, sleep won't come."

For a while neither of us spoke. I sensed that he, too, was still awake, a prey to thoughts of his own. His young subordinate, however, slept the sound sleep of a robust but greatly fatigued person, and from time to time muttered something in his slumbers.

The senior gendarme's deep voice broke in again. "It beats me," he said, "why young persons like yourself, well-bred and educated, as can be seen, do this to their lives."

"Do what?"

"Why pretend, sir? We can see that's not the sort of life you've been used to from your young days."

"What of it? There's been time to get unused..."

"And are you happy about it?" he asked doubtfully.

"Are you about your own lot?"

For a while Gavrilov (let us call my interlocutor by that name) was silent and seemed lost in thought.

"No, I am not happy," he announced. "Trust my word, there are times when I have no use for anything. Why I cannot tell, but sometimes I could lie down and die."

"Do you find the service so hard to bear?"

"Service is service—it's no picnic, to be sure. And we're driven pretty hard by our superiors. But it's not that..."

"What then?"

"Who knows..."

Another pause followed.

"What's the service? You need to look sharp, and that's the gist of it. Besides, I'll be going home soon. I'm a recruit man, and my term will be up shortly. My commander tells me I ought to stay on though. I've got a good name with the force, he says, but the village... What'll I do there?"

"Will you stay?"

"No. True, as to home... I'm no longer used to the hard peasant toil and the grub, not to speak of the rough peasant ways, the coarseness."

"Why hesitate then?"

He thought a little and said:

"I'd like to tell you a story—if you're not afeared of being bored. Something that happened to me..."

"I don't mind," I said.

II

"I began service in 1874, in a cavalry troop, assigned there directly from the new recruits. I served well, did my best, you might say, mostly on detail—now to a parade, now to a theatre; *you* know how it is. Then, too, I knew how to read and write. My superiors were beginning to take notice of me. Our chief, the major, happened to be a fellow countryman of mine. Seeing as how I tried, one day he summons me into his presence and says: 'Gavrilov, I'll have you made a sergeant... Have you ever gone on deportation routes?' I answer: 'Never, Your Excellency!' 'I'll put you down for a subordinate on the next route—to get the knack of it. It's plain sailing really.' I replied that I'd do my duty.

"It was quite true that I had never been assigned on deportation routes with—well, folk like yourself. Plain sailing it may be. But there are ordinance papers that you have to understand, and situations needing prompt action. Well, then....

"About a week later the orderly summons me to our

major and along with me a sergeant. The major says: 'You're assigned to a deportation route. And to the sergeant: 'That's your subordinate, sergeant; he's new on the job.' Then he told us to keep our eyes open, and added he was sure we'd cope with the job, like the smart fellows we were. 'You're to pick up a Miss Morozova,' he went on, 'a political exile, at the fortress prison. Here are your ordinance papers. You can collect the travelling money tomorrow—and off you go!'

'And so Sergeant Ivanov was to go as my senior and I, a private, was much like the second gendarme with me now. The senior man carries the official pouch, receives the travelling money and the ordinance papers. He signs for everything, keeps accounts—well, and the private with him is his help: he runs errands, keeps an eye on the personal effects, and looks after other such matters.

'Next morning when we left headquarters—it was barely getting light—I saw that Ivanov had already had a drink or two. As a matter of fact he was not at all a suitable man for our kind of job and has long since been demoted. He behaved proper in front of his superiors, and to curry favour with them even informed falsely on his fellows. But once out of his superior's sight, he let himself go and his first thought was a drink.

'We came to the prison, submitted a form as required—and stood there waiting. I was curious about the girl-prisoner. I knew we would be going a long way with her—in fact it was this same route, except that you are assigned to a province and she was to a town. Curious I was, I suppose, because it was my first trip, and I wondered—what was a girl political prisoner like?

'We waited for almost an hour while her personal effects were being put together; all they amounted to was a light bundle, with a skirt in it, and one or two other things. There were also a few books—nothing else. I thought: her parents must be folk of meagre means. When she was led out I was struck by her youth. She seemed a mere child. Her fair hair was drawn back into a single braid, and her cheeks were flushed. But later I was to see how really pale she was, in fact, chalk-white, all through the journey. I pitied her the moment I saw her. The higher-ups, I thought,

they won't punish without a reason. She must have committed some political crime, sure enough, but still I pitied her, pitied her from the bottom of my heart.

"While she was getting dressed—putting on her coat and galoshes—we were shown her belongings. It was one of the rules; we were obliged to examine a prisoner's things. We also asked if she had any money with her. She had one ruble and twenty kopecks, which Ivanov took into his keeping. Then he said: 'I have to search your person, miss.'

"She flared at these words. Her eyes blazed, her cheeks flushed deeper. She pressed her lips together in anger. What a look she gave us! It made me cower; I dared not so much as approach her. But Ivanov, quite tipsy as usual, was not to be put off. He walked right up to her. 'I've got to, orders is orders!' he said.

"The way she screamed—it made even Ivanov back away. Her face became pale, all blood gone from it, her eyes flashed darkly and she was furious. She stamped her foot and spoke hotly. I hardly listened, I must admit. The prison warden, too, got frightened and gave her a glass of water. 'Calm down,' he said, 'have pity on yourself!' But she let him have it, too. 'Boors and lacqueys, that's what you are, the lot of you!' she cried. And she went on hurling abuse at us. Now, surely, that's not the way to talk to people who are over you. Full of venom, I thought her then... Aristocratic spawn!

"In the end the warden took her into an adjoining room from which they soon returned with a woman guard. 'We found nothing on her!' the warden said. She glared at him almost laughing right into his face. As to Ivanov, he really did not give a hang, but went on muttering: 'It's against the rules. I know my orders!' The warden ignored him. He could see Ivanov was drunk, and a drunken man inspires little faith.

"We started out on our journey. As our coach passed through the city streets, the girl-prisoner kept peering out of the window, as if she were saying farewell to the city or searching the streets for people she knew. Ivanov then lowered the curtains. She huddled into her corner and kept her eyes averted. I was sorry for her, I must admit.

I lifted the curtain's edge, pretending that I wished to look out of the window myself, and opened up the view for her. Only she did not look, but kept sitting sullenly in her corner, biting her lips so that I thought the blood would come.

"We started out by rail on a clear day in autumn—the month was September. But sunny as it was, a raw wind was blowing—yet our young lady kept opening up the window, and would sit there leaning out to catch the wind. Our orders for transporting prisoners were to keep the windows shut. Ivanov had slumped down on his bunk and was soon snoring; and I could not pluck up the courage to tell her that the window must be kept shut. When I finally did she seemed deaf to my words as though she had not heard them. I waited and then said:

" 'You're sure to catch cold, miss.' "

"She turned her head, opened her eyes wide and gazed as though she had reason to be surprised... Then she said: 'Kindly leave me alone!' And the next minute she was leaning out of the window again. I now gave it up and let her do as she pleased.

"It seemed that she had calmed down a little. From time to time she closed the window, huddling herself into her light coat for warmth. The wind, as I told you, was raw and biting. But then she would soon be looking out again—most likely taking joy in the scenery after being locked away in prison. She cheered up and even smiled to herself. At such times it was a pleasure to look at her! ... Cross my heart, it was..."

The narrator paused to think a little and then continued with a somewhat embarrassed air.

"I wasn't broken into the job, of course. Later, after a good many trips, I knew better. But then it looked odd to me. Wherefore, I thought, are we taking this chit of a girl to some godforsaken place? Don't judge me too harshly, sir, if I tell you I thought of asking the proper permission to wed the miss. I'll knock the nonsense out of her, I said to myself. After all I was not just anybody—I was an official! There's no denying it, I was young and foolish. I see it now. The priest, at the confessional, said this thought of mine was leading me into evil, for the girl, to be sure, was a godless creature.

"From Kostroma we were to go on by a mail-waggon. Most of the time Ivanov was dead drunk and asleep. He only woke up to toss off another bottleful. He reeled when he got out of the train. That's bad, I thought. I feared he might lose the government money in his keeping. But he got to the waggon all right, tumbled in and was soon snoring for all he was worth. It was very awkward to have our miss sit down beside him. She gave him a look full of disgust—shrinking from him, she curled up and squeezed into a corner. I sat down beside the driver. And now we started out. The wind blew from the north. Even I shivered with the cold. The girl took to coughing badly. She put a handkerchief to her mouth. There were stains of blood on it when she took it away, and it wrung my heart to see them. 'Oh, that's bad, miss,' I tell her. 'You're ill! 'Twas wrong to go on this long journey and in the cold autumn. Wrong!'

"She lifted up her eyes, and now seemed to be quite furious again.

" 'Are you dull-witted, or something? Isn't it clear I'm not going of my own accord? You're my gaoler, and yet you dare thrust your pity on me!'

" 'You ought to apply to be put in hospital. 'Tis better than to travel in this cold weather. And it's pretty far you will be going.'

" 'Where?' she inquired.

"There are strict orders not to tell prisoners their place of destination. She saw I hesitated and turned away. 'Never mind, I didn't really mean to ask, and *you* stop prying into my affairs.'

"Yet I blurted it out to her, and added, 'You see what a far place it is.' She tightened her lips, frowned but said nothing. I shook my head. 'You're young, miss,' I said, 'and you don't know what you're in for!'

"I was really annoyed. But she only gave me another of her looks and said:

" 'There you're mistaken, I do know what I'm in for well enough. But the hospital—thank you! If I have to die, I'd much rather it was out of prison, among my own. And should I recover, I would again prefer it to happen outside the prison walls. Do you imagine the wind or the cold weather to be the cause of my illness? Nothing of the kind!'

"Hearing her speak the way she did—about recovering among her *own*—I asked, 'Have you relatives where you're going?'"

" 'No, I've no relatives there,' she replied. 'And the town is strange to me, but I'm bound to meet exiles like myself—comrades.' I was surprised to hear her call strangers 'her own'; would anyone bother to give her food without money when they did not know her? But I asked no more questions. She looked displeased—and I did not want to upset her."

" 'All right,' I reckoned. 'Let be! She's not had it hard yet. Wait till she gets knocked about and learns how bitter 'tis to live in strange parts...'"

"That evening the sky became overcast. A sharp wind rose, and it began to rain. With the mud not yet dried from previous rains, the road turned into a squelchy mass. Mud splattered all of my back, and the girl, too, got her share of splashes. It was bad luck for her—the weather getting so foul. The rain beat into her face, and though we rode in a covered cab, and I had put some matting over the roof for added protection, there were leaks everywhere. I saw that she was chilled. She was all trembling and her eyes were closed. Raindrops trickled down her face. She grew very pale and did not move—as though she fainted. I became quite alarmed. Indeed, it was a bad turn that things took. Ivanov was drunk. There he was snoring, caring for nothing. And I, so green on the job, could not think of what to do."

"We arrived in the town of Yaroslavl close to nightfall. I shook Ivanov awake, and we went to the station. I asked for a samovar to be prepared. There were boats sailing from Yaroslavl. But we had strict orders against taking exiles by boat. For us, though, there was an advantage in boat travel as we could save a little on the fare. But it meant taking a chance. There were policemen, as you know, walking the quay, and local gendarmes, like ourselves, who could report us. But the girl said: 'I refuse to go any farther by stage. I don't care how you do it but take me by boat.' Ivanov who could barely open his eyes after all the drinks he had was furious. 'You have no say in the matter,' he said, 'and will go where you're taken! ' She said nothing to him, but spoke to me:

" 'I'll not go on! Is that clear?'"

"I now took Ivanov aside: 'Why not go by boat? You'll only gain by it, for you'll save on the fare.' He was willing, but afraid. 'There's a colonel in charge here, so we better watch our step, but you could go and ask—not me, I feel bad.' The colonel's house was a short distance away. 'Let's go together and bring the miss along,' I suggested. I was afraid to leave them behind, for Ivanov could drop down drunk somewhere and go to sleep, and the girl could walk off or do herself some harm, for which there would be hell to pay. When we went to the colonel and he asked what we wanted, it was the girl who put the matter before him, but she did not do it in the proper way. Instead of pleading humbly, saying please, do kindly permit—she tackled him in her usual haughty-like manner. 'By what right...' she began, and went on with one bold word after another, the kind you political fellows like so much. That's just what gets under the skin of those on top. They want you to be humble. Still, he listened to what she had to say, and replied civilly enough. 'There's nothing I can do, the law forbids it!' 'The law!' she sneered. 'Yes, that's the law.' The colonel's answer was final.

"For the moment I forgot myself, I admit. 'It may be the law all right, Your Excellency,' I said, 'but the young lady's ailing.' With a severe look, he asked, 'What's your name?' Then turning to her: 'And you, miss, if you're ill, had best go to the prison hospital.' She turned and walked away without another word. We followed. She wanted to avoid the hospital, and since she had already refused to go into one in the first place, who could expect her to remain here, in these strange parts, and with practically no money to her name?

"There was nothing we could do now. Ivanov fell on me: 'A nice mess you've got us into, you dolt; we'll both have to answer.' He would not hear of staying overnight in the town and ordered the horses to be harnessed. We were to start out night or no night. The girl had gone into the station-house. She was lying down on a couch trying to get a little warmer when we came in. 'Get up, miss, the horses are ready,' we told her. She jumped to her feet, drew herself up, and stared straight into our faces. I must say she gave me a fright. 'You brutes,' she started speaking, so

angry and plaintive-like, too. And though it was Russian we could not make out much. The words were too clever. In the end she said: 'You have the power over me; you can hasten my death. Have it your way, I'm ready to go!' The samovar was on the table, but she had not had her tea. We brewed our own tea, and I poured some for her. I also cut her a chunk of the white loaf we had brought along. 'Help yourself,' I said, 'it'll warm you up.' She now paused in the middle of putting on her galoshes, eyed me curiously, shrugged, and said:

" 'You're a funny fellow! Have you gone out of your senses to think I'm going to share your tea with you?' How hurt I was by her words! To this day the blood rushes to my face when I think of them. Take yourself, you aren't squeamish about sharing our meals. Nor was the gentleman Rubanov, another exile, the son of an army officer, mind you. But that miss was. She demanded a samovar all to herself, and as you could expect paid double the price for tea and sugar. And her having no more than a ruble and twenty kopecks! "

III

The narrator fell silent. For a while the house subsided into a stillness, broken only by the even breathing of the young gendarme, and the hiss of the storm outside the window.

"Not napping, are you?" asked Gavrilov.

"No, go on, I'm listening."

After another short pause he continued.

"I suffered much on account of her. It rained all night. The weather was beastly. We passed through woods—they moaned something fearful. I could not see her face, it was pitch dark and murky all the time. And yet—would you believe it? There she was before my eyes as though I saw her in broad daylight: the eyes, the angry face, her body chilled to the bone, and the look, fixed on some point ahead of her as though she were turning her thoughts over and over in her mind. When we were leaving the station, I put a sheepskin coat over her shoulders. 'That'll keep you warm,' I said.

But she threw it off: 'It's your coat, *you* wear it!' The coat was mine all right, but I thought of an answer. 'It's not mine,' I said, 'it's in the kit for prisoners.' Only then did she put it on.

"But it did not do her much good: when it became light I saw how awful she looked. After the next station she insisted that Ivanov get in with the coachman. He grumbled, but saw it was best not to cross her—his head had cleared a bit. I sat down at her side.

"We drove on for three whole days and nights, stopping nowhere, for our orders were not to stop over for the night, except 'when overtaken by extreme fatigue', and even then only in well-patrolled towns. And how few towns there are in these parts you know full well.

"At last our journey was over. When the town she was assigned to came into sight, what a load it was off my chest! I must tell you, towards the end I almost had to support her in my arms. This was after I saw her lying unconscious, her head getting knocked against the side of the coach with every bump in the road. I lifted her up and let her rest with her weight on my right arm. At first she pushed me away. 'Don't you dare touch me,' she said. But later she did not mind. Perhaps it was because she fainted again. Her eyes were shut, shadows darkened the lids, but the face was sweet, less angry. She even looked happier, laughed in her sleep and cuddled to me for warmth. The poor girl might be dreaming of pleasant things. As we neared the town, she came to. The sky had cleared, the sun was looking out, and she cheered up a bit. But when we arrived, there were orders for her to go on. She was not to stay in that town. The local gendarmes were away on missions of their own and so she was to continue in our charge. When I came to tell her we must start, the police station was full of people. They were young ladies, gentlemen, students, obviously from among the local exiles. Like old friends, they shook her hand, asked questions, and before saying good-bye handed her some money and a fine a wool shawl to keep her warm on the way.

"She was cheerful the rest of the journey, but coughed a great deal. And she never as much as looked our way.

"We arrived in the small town of her exile and handed

her over to the police. She asked if there was a person by the name of Ryazantsev living in the town and was told there was. Then the district police officer came. He asked if she had an idea where she would lodge. 'No,' she replied, 'but I'll look up Ryazantsev.' He gave a shrug. She picked up her bundle and left without saying good-bye to us."

IV

The narrator paused to listen if I was still awake.

"And you never saw her again?"

"I did, though I wish I hadn't."

"...I saw her again soon afterwards. We had just got back when we were sent again to the same part of the country. We were taking there a student exile by the name of Zagryazhsky. He was a jolly young man, who sang songs and liked a drink or two. He was assigned to an even farther place of exile. When we stopped on our way at the very town to which the girl was exiled, I was curious to know how she was getting on. 'Is the miss we brought here?' I asked. 'Oh, yes, she's here all right,' they told me. 'But she's a strange one. Soon as she arrived she went off to one of the exiles and has not been seen since. She lives at his place. There's some as say she ails and there's others that say she's his mistress. People will wag their tongues...' I now remembered her saying: 'I want to die among my *own*.' And I grew so very curious ... nay, more than that, plainly speaking, I hankered to visit her. And so I will, I thought. She saw no ill-treatment from me, I figured, and I bore her no grudge.

"Good folk showed me the way. She lived at the far end of town, in a small house with a low door. I walked into the exile's quarters. What I saw was a light room, kept tidy, with a cot in a corner, and the corner draped-off. There were lots of books on the table, and on the shelves. A tiny place was set apart for a workshop where a bench served as a second bed.

"When I came in the girl was sitting on the cot, huddled in her shawl, her legs tucked under her. She was sewing. The exile called Ryazantsev was sitting beside her, on a bench,

and reading aloud to her. He wore specs, a serious-like fellow he looked. She listened as she sewed. When I opened the door and she saw me, the girl raised herself a little, caught the man's hand and gasped. The eyes were big, dark and fearful. And her face was even paler than before. She clutched tight at his hand. 'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Calm yourself!' He did not see me. Then she let go his hand and made to rise. 'Fare-ye-well!' she said to him. 'It looks like they even grudge me a quiet death.' At this moment he turned his head and his eyes fell on me. He jumped to his feet, and it looked to me he was going to make a dash for me and kill me. He was a big tall man.

"They thought I came to take her off again. But then he saw me standing there, frightened out of my wits, and that I've come alone. He took her hand into his own. 'Compose yourself,' he said. Then he spoke to me: 'And you, young gallant, what brings you here?'

"I explained that I came quite on my own, with no special purpose. I had brought the young lady to the town. She had been very sick on the way. All I wanted was to know how she was. He softened. But she was as angry as ever, seething really. Why?—you could ask. Ivanov, to be sure, was not civil enough, but had I not taken her part wherever I could?

"Now that he understood what it was all about, he turned laughing to her: 'See, that's just what I had told you.' These words made it clear that there was some talk about me before—she must have told him about the journey.

" 'Sorry if I scared you,' I put in. 'I chose the wrong time to come. I'll be leaving now, and don't think poorly of me.'

"Ryazantsev got up, and, after giving me a searching look, held out his hand.

" 'Look in on your way back, if you can spare the time,' he said.

"The girl gave us her mocking smile.

" 'I can't see any reason for him looking in again,' she said, 'nor why you should invite him.' 'It's quite all right! Let him come if he likes,' Ryazantsev said, and added, 'Do look in, it'll be all right.'

"I missed much of what they said afterwards. It's because you, gentle folk, can talk smart among yourselves. I would have liked to stay and get the hang of it. But it would be too awkward and even suspicious to them perhaps. And so I left.

"We saw the gentleman Zagryazhsky to his destination, and before we knew it were back in that very town. There the police chief summoned the senior guard. 'You're to remain here until further orders,' he said. 'I received a wire to that effect. You have to wait for the mail.' We stayed, of course.

"There, I thought, I'll go and see them again if only to find out from the landlord how the young lady was. 'She's poorly,' the landlord said, 'like as not will pass away soon. They won't call a priest and I'll be in for trouble.' In the middle of our talk Ryazantsev came out. He greeted me and said: 'So, you're here again? Why don't you come in?' I walked in with a quiet step and he came in after me. 'Oh, it's that odd fellow again,' said the girl. 'Have you sent for him?' 'Of course, I didn't, he came quite on his own.' I was too hurt to keep quiet.

" 'What have I done, miss,' I blurted out, 'for you to be so mad with me? Do you take me for an enemy?'

" 'Just that,' she said, 'and it's high time you knew it! Of course, you're an enemy!' Her voice now sounded weak and faint, her cheeks flamed red, but she was indeed so comely that I could go on looking for ever at her. Then the thought came to me: she won't last long, I must ask her to forgive me. What if she passes away without forgiving me? 'Forgive me,' I said, 'if I have wronged you,' I spoke as a good Christian should... Only there she was getting enraged again... 'Forgive? Now really! Never! Don't expect it! I may be dying, but there is no forgiveness in my heart for you! ' "

The narrator fell silent, and after thinking a little continued more softly and intensely.

"And again they were deep in their own kind of talk. Being an educated man you might catch the drift of it, and so I'll relate to you the words I remember. The words had stuck in my memory but I don't know their meaning.

"Ryazantsev had said: 'He's visiting you now not as a

gendarme at all. He was one when he took you here, as he will take others. Then he acted on his orders. But has he come here on any orders? What do you say yourself, whatever your name is?

" 'My name's Stepan.'

" 'And your patronymic?'

" 'Petrovich.'

" 'Surely, Stepan Petrovich, you've come here out of fellow feeling, am I right?'

" 'Of course, out of fellow feeling. You've put it very aptly. Our orders forbid such calls. If my superiors learn of this visit, I'll get into trouble.'

" 'There, do you see that?' he said clasping her hand. And she pulled it away quickly.

" 'I don't see anything at all. It is you who see and imagine things. As to us (meaning her and myself) we are simple-minded enough to call a spade a spade. Yes, we are enemies! The business of the likes of him is to keep an eye on us; our business is to try and outsmart them. Look at him standing there listening—and I assure you if he knew what we were talking about he'd hurry up and put it all down in a report against us.'

"Ryazantsev turned to me, staring through his specs. His eyes were sharp but kind. 'What have you got to say to that?' he asked. 'But no, you needn't explain anything. In fact, I believe it is you who have cause to be offended.'

"And indeed by the orders and by my service duty I was expected—if the interest I served was opposed—to tell even on my own father. But since it was not for that I had dropped in, I did feel hurt, indeed touched on the raw. I turned to go, but Ryazantsev stopped me.

" 'Don't go yet, Stepan Petrovich, stay a while,' he said. 'It's not nice,' he now spoke to her. 'Nor is it so much a matter of your not forgiving or refusing to make peace with him. Perhaps if he had himself got at the bottom of it all, he would not forgive yourself. It is that you refuse to admit that an enemy, too, can be human. And that makes you no better than a sectarian!'

" 'If I'm that,' she retorted, 'you're a lukewarm prig! All you care about is your books.'

"The word she used made him jump to his feet. It was as

though she had struck him a blow, and she now started in fright herself.

"A prig, you say. You know very well that's not true."

"I suppose I do, but did *you* speak the truth?"

"I did, you're every inch the *boyarina* Morozova."

"She paused to think and then held out her hand to him. He took it. She peered into his face and said: 'I believe you are right!' I felt rather foolish standing there and watching them. There was a lump in my throat. Then she turned to me and with a look no longer angry gave me her hand. 'I'll tell you what,' she said, 'I still hold us to be enemies for life, but I'll shake hands with you. And I do wish, aside from orders, you turn into a human being one day. I'm fatigued,' she added to Ryazantsev."

"I took my leave. Ryazantsev followed me out. Standing in the yard with him I thought I saw the tears start in his eyes."

"'How long will you be staying in the town, Stepan Petrovich?' he asked."

"'Another two or three days perhaps, until the mail arrives.'"

"'If you feel like dropping in again,' he said, 'you're welcome. You're not a bad fellow considering the job you have.'"

"'I'm sorry, I scared her...'"

"'You did—next time have the landlady first tell us of your arrival.'"

"'There's just something I'd like to know. You mentioned *boyarina* Morozova. Would that mean that the young lady, too, is of boyar stock?'"

"'Boyar or no boyar, but she sure comes of a stock you can break—you've broken her already, as a matter of fact—but never bend. That you saw for yourself. People of her kind do not bend.'"

"I now said good-bye."

V

"She died soon afterwards. I did not see the funeral, for I was busy at the police station. It was not until the next

day that I ran into Ryazantsev. He looked terrible.

"He was a tall fellow, with a serious face. He used to look kindly enough at me before, but this time he met me with a dark scowl. He took my hand to shake it, but then right away dropped it and turned his face away. 'I can't bear the sight of you,' he said. 'Be off, fellow, be off!' His head sank on his chest and he walked away. I returned to my quarters so put out that I could not take a morsel of food for two days. It was from that time on that anguish came over me.

"Next day the police chief called us. 'You may go now, your paper has come,' he said. The paper was an order for the young lady's further deportation. Too late! The Lord had pity on her, and took the matter in his own hands!

"...Mind you, this is not the end of the story. On our way back we stopped at a station. When we walked into the station-room there was a samovar on the table. There were, too, all sorts of refreshments laid out to which an old lady was treating the station mistress. She was a tiny, neat and cheerful old soul, chattering much, and telling the station mistress all about her own affairs. 'See, I sold the house I inherited,' she was saying, 'packed my belongings, and am now on my way to my little dove. What a surprise it'll be to her! To be sure, the darling will be cross. She'll scold me but I know she'll be happy to see me. True, she wrote to me that I must not come, on no account. But never mind that.'

"My heart missed a beat. I hurried into the kitchen. 'Who may that old lady be?' I ask the kitchen wench. 'She be none other than the mother of that young lady you took along this way,' she answers. I staggered at these words. My face showed how shaken I was. 'What's the matter with you, soldier?' asks the wench. 'Be still! Don't you go yelling,' I say. 'The young lady is dead.'

"And here the girl—a pretty loose one she was, carrying on with all the travellers—claps her hands in dismay, lets out a loud wail and dashes out of the house. I picked up my hat, and I walked out, too. The old lady was still talking to the station mistress and her chatter rang in my ears. I can't tell you how terrible I felt on her account. I stumbled down the road, quite a while later Ivanov overtook me with the cart and I climbed in."

VI

“...That’s the way it was. Then the police chief reported my visit to the exile’s home, and the colonel at Kostroma reported, too, the way I pleaded for the young lady. It all piled up so that my superior would not recommend me for promotion. ‘What sort of a sergeant would you make?’ he says to me. ‘You’re no better than an old woman. What you need, you fool, is to be put in the cooler.’ Only the way I felt then I could not care less and was not a bit sorry for what I had done.

“And all the while I was unable to put that angry young lady out of my mind. Even as I speak now she is there before my eyes.

“What could it mean? Is there any one who could explain it? You’re not asleep, are you, sir?”

I was not asleep... The gloom of the little hut tucked away in the woods tormented my soul, and the sad image of the dead girl loomed in the darkness amidst the muffled wailing of the storm...

GLEB USPENSKY

(1843–1902)

Gleb Uspensky was one of the intellectuals whose writings were influenced by the aesthetic criteria of Belinsky, Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky.

The son of a civil servant, Uspensky grew up in an atmosphere of officialdom. "In my childhood," he recalled, "I experienced and witnessed many disasters among the peasantry; corruption reigned everywhere; I was only too familiar with cruel recruitments of levies, bribery among district officials and clerks and all the red tape of litigation..."

The relative material prosperity in which he spent his childhood years gave way to an impecunious and hungry adolescence. Interrupted studies at Petersburg University, from which he was expelled for participation in student disturbances, an unsuccessful attempt to enter Moscow University, worry about where the next meal was coming from and—after the death of his father the problem of feeding the whole family—wanderings about various magazines and attempts to find a regular job—such was life for Gleb Uspensky in the 1860s. The most important work of this period was a collection of essays, "The Morals of Rasteryaeva Street" (1866).

His adherence to the principles of revolutionary-democratic aesthetics brought him close to the populist writers, Pomyalovsky, Reshetnikov and Levitov. An ability to spot vivid and expressive detail, consummate mastery of the folk idiom and gentle humour gave his writing a charm all of its own and singled him out from the literary

run of the mill. In 1867-68, the magazine "Otechestvennye Zapiski" was taken over by Nekrasov and Shchedrin, who encouraged the talented writer to submit regular contributions. Uspensky's unfailing attention to the urgent questions of the time, his severe criticism of the 1861 reform, which formally liberated the serfs but did not solve any economic and social problems or improve the desperate condition of the peasantry, and his constant contacts with revolutionary populist groups ended in his being put under permanent police surveillance in 1873. His police record bore the following note: "Suspected of political unreliability in view of his aspirations to draw nearer to the peasants..."

In the 1880s, the spectacular development of capitalism began in Russia accompanied by the impoverishment of broad masses of the peasantry. A series of essays "Living Figures" (1888), tells about life in the post-reform village and about woman's role in the peasant family. The power of money is ruining the peasantry, labour beyond their powers is draining them of all their strength and robbing them of the joy of life.

Uspensky's originality as a creative writer and his aesthetic credo are expressed most fully in the essay, "She Smoothed Me Out" (1885), one of Uspensky's finest works. Describing his personality, Vladimir Korolenko wrote: "He was alone, purely himself, he did not resemble anyone and no one resembled him. He was a unique member of the human race, a man of rare beauty and rare worth."

*SHE SMOOTHED ME OUT**

(Extract from Tyapushkin's notes)

...I. S. Turgenev apparently said the following words through Potugin in *Smoke*** : "The Venus of Milo is *more undoubted* than the principles of the year Eighty-Nine". What is the implication of that baffling "*more undoubted*"? That the Venus of Milo is undoubted, but that the principles are doubtful? And is there, finally, anything in common between these two, the doubtful phenomenon and undoubted one?

I don't know how the "savants" interpret it, but it seems to me, that not only do "principles" stand on the very line which ends with "undoubted", but that even I, Tyapushkin, now a village schoolmaster, even I, an insignificant rural creature, am also on that same line where there are principles, where there are other amazing manifestations of the human soul thirsting for perfection, that line at the end of which, according to the present times, I, Tyapushkin, am fully agreed to place the Venus of Milo. Yes, we are all one line, and if I, Tyapushkin, perhaps stand on the farthest end of that line, if I am inconspicuous in size, that certainly does not mean that I am more doubtful than the "principles" or that the principles are more doubtful than the Venus of Milo. All of us—I, Tyapushkin, the principles and Venus are equally *undoubted*, that is my soul, at present manifesting itself in exhausting school work, in a mass of insignificant, although daily, troubles and torments inflicted on me by the life of the people, is acting and living in the same undoubted direction and meaning which also lie in undoubted principles and are widely expressed in the undoubtedness of the Venus of Milo.

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1985

** *Smoke* (1867), the novel by I. Turgenev.

Then say, please, just what you have worked out: the Venus of Milo is undoubted, "principles" are doubtful, but I, Tyapushkin, stuck for some reason in the depths of the country, tormented by its present realities, saddened by and absorbed in its future—a person discussing bast shoes, village kulaks and so on—I am supposed to be so insignificant that there isn't even any room for me on this earth! Wrong! Precisely because, at the very moment when I write this, I am sitting in a freezing cold hut because, thanks to the good-for-nothing village elder, I have a damaged stove choked with wet, hissing, smoking firewood, and because I sleep on bare boards under a torn sheepskin coat, and because they want to humiliate me nearly every day—precisely because of these reasons I cannot, and will not, distance myself from that same *line*, which through principles and hundreds of other great phenomena thanks to which man has grown up, will perhaps lead him to the perfection which the Venus of Milo makes it possible to sense. You say, its "truth and beauty are there; but here, with you, there are *only* muzhiks' bast shoes, torn sheepskins and fleas! " Nothing of the kind! ...

I am writing this because of something quite unexpected that happened to me. Thanks to Shrovetide, I was in a provincial town yesterday, partly on business, partly to obtain books, partly to have a look at what was going on there. And with the exception of a few minutes spent in the laboratory of a high-school teacher, minutes devoted to science, to conversation "not of this world" and reminiscent of a discourse between two monks in a monastery cell—everything that I saw outside that cell truly tormented me. I am not condemning or reproaching anyone; I cannot even express agreement or disagreement with the convictions of those members of the gubernia intelligentsia whom I saw. No! My soul pined for some five or six hours spent in gubernia society simply because I did not see even the signs of these convictions, because instead those intellectuals are under a kind of sad, maudlin compulsion to convince themselves and everybody else that there cannot possibly be a person conscious of himself and that they must make enormous efforts of mind and conscience in order to build their lives on a blatant lie, deceit and rhetoric.

I left the town with what felt like an enormous lump of ice in my chest; my heart needed nothing and my mind refused to function. And at that deathly moment I was suddenly upset by the following episode.

"The train will wait for two minutes!" announced the conductor, hurrying along the carriages.

I soon found out why the conductor had been in such haste. In those two minutes, a great crowd of new recruits, part of the latest call-up from several districts, had to be put into the third-class carriages.

The train stopped; it was between four and five in the afternoon. The dense shadows of twilight had already descended on to the earth. Big snowflakes were falling from the dark sky on to the huge mass of people crowding the platform: wives, mothers, fathers, fiancées, sons, brothers, uncles—in a word, a mass of people. They were weeping, drunk, sobbing, shouting, saying good-bye. Vigorously applied fists, raised elbows and pushing hands aimed in concert at the mass and among the mass, made the people surge up to the carriages like a frightened herd, fall between the buffers, mutter drunkenly, lie on the platform, on the brake of the wagon, crawl, fall, weep and shout. There was the crash of windows breaking in carriages which were jam-packed with people, heads popped through the broken windows, dishevelled, cut by broken glass, drunk, tear-stained, shouting hoarsely, wailing.

The train pulled out.

It all lasted literally two or three minutes, and this "moment" truly shook me; as if an enormous layer of damp earth had been ripped off by an unknown force, torn off by a gigantic plough from its time-honoured place, torn off so as to crack and snap the living roots with which this layer of earth had grown into the soil, torn off and carried goodness knows where... I imagined thousands of peasant homes and families wounded, with severed limbs, left to their own devices to heal those wounds, to "recover", to let skin grow over the wounded places.

The contrived imposition of spiritual untruth by means of fine words, the contrived efforts not to live but merely to preserve the shell of life—an impression I had brought with me from the town—having merged with this "real

truth" of country life which I glimpsed in a scene lasting two minutes, gave me a feeling of infinite misery, a feeling that beggars all description.

Returning to my cold, unfriendly hut with its icy window-sills and its cold stove, I was so crushed by the awareness of that misery that I involuntarily felt myself to be the unhappiest of unhappy creatures. "See what it's come to," I thought, and, remembering my whole life in an instant, I involuntarily began grieving deeply over it: it all seemed like a series of the most unwelcome impressions, heartaches, endless torment, without a ray of light, without the slightest warmth, cold and exhausted; and, at that moment, not allowing me to see anything pleasant at all even in the future.

Filling the stove with damp wood, I wrapped myself in my torn sheepskins and lay down on the home-made wooden bed with my face buried in the straw-stuffed pillow. I dozed off, but as I slept I could feel "unhappiness" drilling my brains all the time; the grief of my life was piercing me through and through. I did not have any bad dreams, but something incessantly oppressing my brain and heart made me sigh heavily in my sleep. I felt something else; this something was so unlike what I had been experiencing so far that, although I was asleep, I knew that something good was happening to me; in another second, a warm drop stirred in my heart; another second, and something hot blazed up with such a powerful and joyous flame, that I shook all over the way children start in their sleep when they are growing. I opened my eyes.

The feeling of unhappiness had vanished; I felt fresh and excited, and as soon as I trembled and opened my eyes, all my thoughts immediately concentrated on one single question:

"What is *this*? Where has *this* happiness come from? What have I remembered? Why am I so delighted?"

I was so unhappy in general and had been so unhappy in the last hours that I simply had to restore the memory that had made me so happy in my sleep; I was appalled even at the thought that I would not remember, that I would only have what had been yesterday and today, left for me, including these sheepskins, the cold stove, the uncomfortable room and the truly "dead silence" of night in the country.

Unaware of the cold in my room and its unfriendliness, I smoked cigarette after cigarette, staring with wide open eyes into the dark and recalling to mind everything in my life that had been of *this* kind.

The first thing that I remembered and that was slightly like the impression at which I had started and woken up, strange to say, was a most insignificant country scene. I don't know why I remembered how, riding past the haymaking one hot summer's day, I took particular notice of a peasant woman who was turning over the hay: everything about her, the figure with the tucked-up skirt, the bare legs, the red kerchief on the head, the pitch-fork with which she was turning over the dry hay, was so light and graceful, so "alive"; *she was working* but yet so effortlessly, she was in full harmony with nature, with the sun, the breeze, the hay, the whole landscape into which her body and her soul seemed to merge, that I watched her for a long time, thinking and feeling only one thing: how beautiful!

My straining memory was working tirelessly: the image of the peasant woman, distinct down to the finest detail, was glimpsed and then vanished, giving way to another memory and image. This time there was neither sun, nor light, nor fragrance of the fields, but something grey and dark, and, against this background, a girl of stern, almost nun-like aspect. I saw this girl also from the side, but she likewise made a bright, "joyous" impression because the profound sorrow written on her face—the sorrow about *someone else's* grief—at the slightest movement she made was harmoniously fused with her personal, private sorrow, and the two sorrows, merging, made her unique, so that it was absolutely impossible for her heart, her soul, her thoughts, even her sleep to be penetrated by anything that could "not match", could violate the harmony of self-sacrifice that she personified. Consequently, with one glance at her, any "suffering" lost its frightening aspects, became simple, easy, reassuring and, above all, vital. Instead of the words "how terrible" one was forced to say, "How beautiful! How good! "

But this image also went away and for a long, long time my straining memory could draw nothing out of the infinite darkness of life's impressions; but it was working hard and without respite, it was darting about, as if trying to find

someone or something in dark alleys and back streets, and I felt, at last, that the next moment it would take me there, that ... it was already near... somewhere nearer ... just a little more... But what is this?

Believe it or not, but suddenly, without having had time to recover and think, I found myself, not in my frozen den with its tumbledown stove, but nowhere else than in the Louvre, in the very room where the Venus de Milo stands... Yes, she now stands very clearly before me, exactly as she ought to be, and I now distinctly see that it was indeed *this* at which I had woken up. Then, too, many years ago, I had woken up before her, all my joints cracking, as happens "when a child is growing", as during this night.

I calmed down. Nothing like that had ever happened to me again. My memory ceased its abnormal straining and I began calmly recalling how it had all happened.

II

...How long ago it had been! No less than twelve years back, I happened to be in Paris. At that time I was giving lessons at Ivan Ivanovich Polumrakov's house. In the summer of 1872, Ivan Ivanovich and his wife and children, and also his sister-in-law with her husband and children, made ready to go abroad. It was proposed that I should be with the children, and they, the Polumrakovs and the Chistoplyuevs, would "have a rest". They regarded me as a wild nihilist; but they willingly kept me with the children, assuming that nihilists, though dangerous people and, moreover, of very limited world outlook, dense and narrow-minded, at least "didn't talk rubbish". Even then the Polumrakovs and Chistoplyuevs felt that as regards the children's naive and simple questions, they were put in a fairly embarrassing position; it was "shameful to drivel" but "to tell the truth was terrible" and they were therefore compelled to answer the children's most urgent and important questions with some kind of neutral sentence such as, "You're too young to know that", "You won't understand", and sometimes, when it was a particularly awkward one, they would simply say, "Oh, what a little pest you are! Can't you see, Papa's busy?"

It was therefore assumed that I, the nihilist, would give their children a "definite" outlook, though limited, narrow-minded world outlook and they, the parents, would do the rounds of Paris. I really don't know how it came about that the ladies and children with the companion and a certain aged general found themselves somewhere at the sea-side, while the husbands and I remained in Paris "for a few days". It is, moreover, remarkable that the ladies, on departing, were very kind to me and even said that they were leaving the men "in my care". I now can guess that the ladies had the same views and reservations about me that they all admitted where nihilists were concerned, that is, although I was dense, wild and limited, and was capable of everything short of stubbing out my cigarettes in my tea-glass, my "limited" world outlook would nevertheless compel Ivan Ivanovich and Nikolai Nikolayevich to comport themselves in my presence somewhat less loosely than they would have done if, after the departure of their wives, they had been left in Paris alone with their broad-minded world outlook. "All the same, they'll feel ashamed with *him*!" That, it seems, was precisely what the ladies were thinking when they kindly left me in Paris with their menfolk.

The time allowed to us for rest was extremely short, and Paris is so vast and so diverse that every minute was precious. I remember a hasty tour of the restaurants, the passages, the boulevards, the theatres and the suburban beauty spots. Sometimes there was mass of impressions without any conclusions drawn, although at every step one of us invariably uttered the words, "But back home, in Russia..." This would invariably be followed by something ironic or even silly, but drawn direct from life in Russia.

The comparisons were never in favour of our homeland.

This impossibility of sorting out a mass of impressions was aggravated still further by the fact that Paris in 1872 was no longer the exceptionally varied architectural "tra-la-la" that the leisured Russian had come to think of it as being. The War and the Commune were just over and the Versailles courts martial were still functioning. There were still piles of garbage and rubble behind the railings of the Vendôme Column, reminders of its recent demolition; the plate-glass windows of the restaurants were still starred by

the bullets of the Communards; traces of bullets—little white rings with a margin of black soot—dotted in their hundreds the façades of majestic churches, the Legislative Assembly and other public buildings; Justice's nose had flown off goodness knows where, and all was not well with the right temple of Equity. In the middle of all this were the sombre ruins of the Tuilleries with fire-reddened iron girders and rafters protruding. At every step it could be seen that a harsh, cruel, ungloved hand had dealt a deafening slap in the face to all that until recently gilded "tra-la-la". In this way, although the Paris of the "tra-la-la" was as busy as before, as if nothing had happened, it was impossible not to sense in this bustle a kind of effort: the mark of the slap burned luridly on a face trying to look merry and carefree, and the combination of the crude chansonette resurrected from the ashes with the roll of drums in the Satory camp, which meant that someone was being executed, added to the variegated impressions of the Parisian day unpleasant feelings of shame and even ignominy that prevented our enjoying those impressions freely. That is why, amongst other things, it was very difficult for us to clarify them: we would rush round all day, see our fill, eat our fill, look our fill, listen our fill, eat and drink our fill a few more times and return to our hotel, but we could only mutter something vague, although diverse and even infinitely so.

I really cannot remember how we finally succeeded in spotting a feature that seemed essential to us and distinguished "us" from "them"; we clutched at it as if it were a thread in a labyrinth.

The waiter, for instance, served our breakfast in an out-of-town restaurant and then sat down not far from us to read the newspaper. Guided by the thread we had picked up, we did not miss the opportunity to discuss that circumstance after breakfast in the following manner.

Yes, the human personality here is whole and intact. There he is, a lackey, a waiter: he serves courses, he's working for a crust of bread, but he's a human being! It's not like our own lackey, who will cringe in front of you even if there's no money in it. Not only will he serve plates, breathless with awe that "fine ladies and gentlemen are eating"; he will also put on a serf face, and he won't walk, he'll

scurry about with the plates, he'll get himself into a lather in the desire to please. And that's not all by a long chalk! But this one here's a different matter. He's a human being, he's interested in everything. He keeps back five per cent of the francs you spend, and that's that. No, he's not a lackey.

The cocottes, the ladies of the boulevards, also proved to be not just cocottes, but human beings, every single one of them.

It's not a human wreck with a black eye being driven along Nevsky Prospekt to police station, or one who calmly, like a street-vendor hawking his ware, invites you in the light of the day to go for a stroll, supposing that this stroll is a kind of duty—not for nothing has the management furnished her with a document. No, it's not like that here! Here, although she practices "the trade", the human being is alive in her; she busies herself with the trade and reads a book. What can she do about it? It's that sort of system, there's no alternative! I once, quite by chance, (Ivan Ivanovich said these words off-handedly, as it were, and Nikolai Nikolayevich also looked evasively somewhere down and to one side at these words) got talking right there on the boulevard to a certain Miss... I don't remember, whether I was eating an ice-cream or not, but Lord! she was intelligent. It was a lively, brilliant chat! "The trade!" The trade is the trade, but the human being is aware of her human worth. Now there's something for you!

We managed to get into the Versailles courts martial where at that time they were "dealing with the Communards". They were dealing with them without the slightest mercy. Up to fifteen cases would be tried in an hour and a half. Moreover, whatever the accused muttered in their justification—for the most part they were wretched-looking tailors, cobblers and apprentices—the judges, uncovering their heads at the great words "*au nom du peuple français*", sentenced the prisoner to Cayenne or Nouméa*. The courtroom for these trials consisted of four or six cubicles made of plain boards, and people were being sentenced in each one.

* Cayenne—a town in Guyana. Nouméa—the capital of the island of New Caledonia.

But what do you expect, sir? This is a struggle. Two systems, two world outlooks are confronting one another. What indulgence or condescension can there be here?.. Which side will prevail?.. It's different with us, a woman who has borne and strangled a baby in a moment of despair is sent to Siberia, and then the very people sending her away will have a collection towards her journey. It's unjust and foolish. No, here it's open, clear, simple—all above board! Here, sir, people are people, defending with struggle and blood every step they take on this earth... There's none of that humane babble here which makes you feel sick as it does with us and which certainly doesn't prevent a humane jabberer from getting you banished out of personal malice or petty hatred... No! People here are "human beings", they live and act without pretence and only in a human way... But what can you do if man is generally bad!

We looked into the National Assembly, also situated in Versailles. And here everything proved entirely human.

It's not like at home where some pen-pusher, a lifeless dead soul, scribbles away meaningless papers and doesn't hesitate to execute everyone who doubts the importance of the inscribed sheet of paper. At home, papers are the reality; as for life, it's a pigsty. It's not like that here at all; there's life everywhere—on the street and in the National Assembly. Take it for what it is. Look over there to your right: he's eaten, he's had breakfast—his stomach wants him to relax. And Gambetta, just look, he's stroking his stomach, the lad's also had something to eat—quite a lot, it must be. Well, never mind!.. It's three o'clock, the stomach's long been rumbling... Why not have a bite? But they're jabbering! They all had a good time at breakfast, the brandy hasn't worn off yet... Really, it's nothing! Don't worry. They'll do what's needed for the business in hand! The business in hand is free and easy! It's only where we come from that people knock themselves out for whole years, wearing holes in their leather chairs scribbling official papers, and all to no purpose! No, here there is life, there are human beings; here, sir, everything is human, without frills and fancy phrases!

When we went to London for a day or two, the "truth" assailed us from all sides, at every step, in all forms and in

all its meanings.

In a certain "authentic" English restaurant, for five shillings, instead of the five-franc Parisian dinner, we were served with the same course three times in succession. Three times we were able to order and eat a good piece of meat from some wild animal, which, in roast form, rode on a kind of wheeled cart round the restaurant (while all the patrons maintained a dead silence), stopping wherever an empty plate was conspicuous.

"Just so!" said Ivan Ivanovich delightedly, when we had indeed partaken of that dish until we were bursting and had gone outside again. "Once life is truthful without falsity", he continued, "it must be truthful in all things. Man toils, does real work from dawn to dusk, so he needs real food, there is no sense in him distending his stomach with *hors d'oeuvres* and pickles. To eat means to eat properly, and there you have one course for five shillings! It's magnificent!"

The English "truth" was proving far superior to the French, and we were soon convinced of this by a most irrefutable fact. Someone (Herr Baedeker, apparently) prevailed on us to go down to Greenwich and sample the famous parliamentary dinner of "small fish". Neither in its price nor in its "celebrity" could this dinner be that business dinner of the business man that had so enraptured us with its "truth". This had to be something particularly refined. What was our surprise when even this famous dinner once again convinced us that whenever "truth" is at the basis of life, there is no place for lies, or pretence, or invention even in the tiniest manifestations of daily life. The dinner consisted of many fish courses; little fish, such as gudgeon, figured prominently, and these courses of little fish were only once in a while varied by courses of salmon or something similar. However, neither the small fish nor the salmon nor any of the other fishes served at that dinner were offered in a "pretended" or untruthful aspect so that, having eaten it, one could in all conscience say, "How tasty!" The salmon smelt of salmon, or rather it had that fishy smell characteristic of paper or a hand that has been in contact with fish. The truthful English imagination could not falsify as the French would falsify. The same natural, truly fishy smell was given

off by all the other outside pieces of outside fish that appeared at the dinner.

As for the hero of the dinner, the gudgeon, the irreproachably truthful English thought even here could not descend to charlatanry and fabrication, and it only had the nerve to give one course some kind of distinction from the other. This was done by means of pepper. The fish was fried in plain pepper, or in cayenne, then in a slight quantity, then more heavily, then even more mildly, then even stronger, while the fish itself retained its natural fishy smell and invariably smelt of God knows what. After about ten such dishes, when moustaches, napkins and hands—in a word, everything on and around you—began to smell of fish and river water, there appeared the last and culminating specimen of small fish which, as it subsequently turned out, worthily crowned the edifice of the true dinner. This last fish, extremely small, lay on a big white plate without any garnishes or accompaniments, somehow solitary and baffling: its tiny body was twisted as if in a mortal convulsion, and its loneliness on the white plate was also somewhat mysterious. Peering at this pearl creation, I could not, however, see anything particularly mysterious except for some tiny red specks dotted over its puny form. But when, picking it by the tail, we all opened our mouths and, thinking to swallow the nonentity, casually put it where required, we could not shut our mouths again; the tiny creature stabbed the throat like a red hot needle, burned the mouth and, after frightful exertions, slid further down, burned the whole gullet and, like a minelayer, darted round the stomach, trying to blow it up in twenty places.

For about two minutes we washed this "food" down with Seltzer water, soda water and wine and only after having recovered were we finally able to utter coherent sounds.

"Yes! " said Ivan Ivanovich somewhat enigmatically, and he applied himself to the soda water again.

"That's the devil," said Nikolai Nikolayevich, who had started sneezing for some reason and, once he had finished, added, "that's not pepper... It's something else... Some kind of Bengal fire... Devil take it! "

"But isn't it a fact how profoundly truthful they are?" said Ivan Ivanovich finally. "What wouldn't a Frenchman

make out of a dinner like that? It would be a Babylonian feast! But these—no! They haven't got what it takes for fabrication or pretence... Business, business, business! Real business thinking works stubbornly, ceaselessly, forges ahead, an inch at a time... And it has no talent for the sauce, the couplet, the architectural ornament. Truth, truth! That's where the root of this life is! ”

And then according to the proverb, “the quarry seeks the hunter,” everything we saw in London impressed us from the viewpoint of the unfabricated truth and total lack of artifice.

If we encountered poverty, it was such destitution, such horror, such filth, that one could only stop dead and stare in sheer horror at an irreproachably clear phenomenon of life. There was not even a trace of the decent exterior with which the Parisian poor can cover themselves, buying a shirt, a blouse, a hat and shoes for three or four francs; whole strings of poor children, whole piles of them, heaps of nondescript rags, dirt like pancakes on the sick faces, dirt on the bald patches of the festering head—all scuttling about the side-streets in the poor quarters. Yes, this is poverty indeed. Uncovered! Look, and you never forget that “truth” of today's human society for the rest of your life.

On the other hand, wealth is also real wealth!

Just take a look at that well-nourished idol with the cigar in the corner of his mouth, riding probably to the park on a most unusual vehicle (it cannot possibly be called a carriage). The idol sits on a sort of tiny little seat, from under which steel threads, like enormous spider's legs, stick out in various directions. He is in mid-air, high over the crowd, and there is nothing at all under him, only needles glittering in the sun, and there is no telling what they are—wheels, or the legs of a steel spider. Look at him, and the mere sight of him, the mere “breed” seen in him, will tell you that he is congenitally incapable of understanding what kind of creatures are scuttling about at the wheels of his spider-like vehicle. He is incapable of pity for poverty, for these tiny little persons, exhausted and black with coal-dust.

In a word, we brought back a fairly valuable impression from London: “There it is life, at the basis of which lies the unadorned human truth! Look and learn! ”

III

However, in spite of the copious material we accumulated during those days of rushing about and touching on the truth of human relations which humanity has managed to achieve, we felt bored for some reason on returning to Paris. One grey day, continuing to "finish seeing" what we had left unseen, we went without the slightest pleasure round the Parisian catacombs, where countless side galleries were still being guarded by watchmen or were barred off by chains. This was so that the foreigner should not stumble into the bodies of the Communards who, they say, had fled into the catacombs to escape from the Versailles troops, had lost their way and had perished in great numbers. On the same day, we also saw the famous Morgue with many bodies very decently and inoffensively laid out before the visitors; except that the rags and tatters taken from these dead who had drowned, burned, shot, or poisoned themselves, were hung near the corpses on lines so that the deceased could be identified from their clothes if it was impossible to tell from their faces—this was evidence of bitter, hopeless poverty. The soles of one young woman's feet, turned to the public, were a mass of callouses; the poor wretch had slaved all her life! We wanted to go down into the famous sewers, but our guide gave us a description of them that took our breath away. Just imagine, (kindly excuse me for this distasteful picture): the human abortions floating in those fetid waters (my apologies) numbered tens of thousands by his reckoning.

Ivan Ivanovich was no longer saying "Even so, it's the unvarnished truth—look, suffer and learn". On the contrary, he suggested we distract ourselves from these impressions of the day. Nothing but corpses! In the catacombs alone, there were three million skeletons, in the Morgue, about ten "fresh" deceased, and in the sewers we would have seen thousands of dead bodies. We ought to have a rest from all this "human" interest with something less sinister. When, however, we sat down that evening on the iron seats in a café-concert on the Champs Elysées, and when the merry-making began before us (which, I repeat, had not yet lost the traces of the recent blow), and when we remembered

that thousands of unborn babies were perhaps floating down there in the sewer under the Champs Elysées, and when we remembered that the roll of drums was still resounding in Versailles—when we remembered all this, we felt very miserable.

The next morning, I left the hotel without waiting for my patrons to wake up. I was downcast, wretched and lonely in the extreme. As a result of the "truth" I had seen, I felt as if chilly, freezing slime had stuck to my body. Something bitter, terrible and vile was oppressing my soul. Without the slightest desire to go along any particular street, I walked all over Paris for tens of versts, bearing that bitter, terrible and vile burden with me. Quite unexpectedly I came to the Louvre. Without the slightest moral need, I went into the entrance hall, once inside, I automatically walked here and there, automatically looked at the ancient sculptures about which, of course, by virtue of my position as Tyapushkin, I understood absolutely nothing. I was aware of only weariness, a noise in my ears and a prickling sensation at the temples. Suddenly, in complete bewilderment, without knowing why, struck by something unusual and unfathomable, I stopped in front of the Venus de Milo in the big room which every visitor to Louvre knows and, no doubt, remembers in every detail.

I stood in front of her, contemplating her and wondering, "What has *happened* to me?" I asked myself this question as soon as I saw the statue, because I felt that a great joy had come upon me... Until then I had been (as it suddenly occurred to me) like the glove crumpled in my hand. Was it shaped like a human hand? No, it was just a ball of leather. But if I blew into it, it would become a human hand. Something beyond my comprehension had breathed into the depths of my crumpled, mangled, tormented being and had straightened me out; I could feel my body tingling where there seemed to have been only numbness; something had made my joints "crack" exactly as when someone is growing up, and also made me wake up suddenly, all the traces of my recent sleep gone, and filled my expanding breast and my whole restored being with freshness and light.

I looked intently at that marble enigma, trying to work out what had happened. What was it? Where did it contain

the secret of that firm, tranquil, joyful state of all my whole being, which had flowed into me so inexplicably? I couldn't answer a single question. I felt that the word did not exist in any language for the life-creating mystery of that marble *being*. But I did not doubt for a moment that the warden, the guide, the expounder of the wonders in the Louvre, was telling the essential truth when he affirmed that Heine used to come and sit here, on this narrow little settee upholstered in red velvet; that he sat here for whole hours and wept; this simply had to be true. I also understood that the Louvre administration had done a great service for the whole world by hiding this marble enigma during the Franco-Prussian War in an oak box and burying it deep in cellars impenetrable to the Prussian bombs. That a piece of cast iron, discharged by an idiot who had stuffed himself full of pea sausage, could smash *this* to smithereens seemed at that moment a villainy which could not be avenged by all the cruelties ever invented on Earth. Smash *this*? It would be like depriving the world of the sun; life would not be worth living, if it were impossible, even if only once in a lifetime, to experience *this*! What scoundrels! When they've enough of their pea sausage, they dare do such a thing! No, it must be protected like the apple of one's eye, every grain of this prophecy must be preserved. I did not know "why", but I knew that real treasures lay in these display cases containing fragments of arms; that it was necessary at all costs to find those arms, that life would then be even better on earth and that there would be true joy indeed.

I do not remember how long I puzzled over the elucidation of what had so unexpectedly widened, straightened out and filled my soul with freshness and tranquillity. A Russian appeared whose whole figure testified that he was already fully sated with the delights of the boulevards. I was compelled to leave the room by the dissipated look of this man who had evidently only just breakfasted and who began unceremoniously to ogle my enigma, evidently not finding anything special (he'd seen a few things in his time!). I could have taken offence at the dissipated fellow, but it was *impossible* even to consider that at such a moment I could even think of living by anything that constituted the simple

necessity of *that time*, that is, of the time when I had been a crumpled glove. Allow myself to be crumpled up as I had been an hour ago and all my life until that hour? No, no! I could not even eat or drink that day. So unnecessary and offensive it seemed for that new something inside me that I carefully bore back to my room.

From that day, I felt not the need, but the absolute necessity, the inevitability for the most irreproachable conduct. It had now become unthinkable, since that unforgettable day, to say anything wrong, even to avoid offending someone, to keep mum about something bad, keeping it to myself, to say some empty, meaningless phrase solely for decency's sake, to do something that could in the least embarrass me or, on the contrary, could in the least embarrass someone else. It would mean losing the joy of feeling myself a human being, which had become familiar to me and which I did not dare to reduce even by a hair. Cherishing my spiritual joy, I was reluctant to visit the Louvre often and went there only if I felt that I could absorb the life-giving mystery "with a clear conscience". On such days I usually woke up early, left the house without talking to anyone and went to the Louvre first, when nobody was yet there. Then I would be so afraid of accidentally losing the capacity to feel to the full what I had experienced here, that at the slightest spiritual unease I would refrain from going close to the statue, but would arrive, view it from a distance, see that it was there, say to myself, "Well, thank God, I can carry on living in this wide world," and I would then go away.

Even so, I could not have defined the mystery of that work of art and what precisely it was, what features, what lines, revived, smoothed out and expanded the crumpled human soul. I constantly reflected on it and still could not communicate or express anything certain. I do not know whether I would have languished long if one completely fortuitous circumstance had not brought me out on what seemed to be the true path and had not finally given me the chance to answer for myself the unsolved question: Why? What is the mystery?

Quite by chance, I remembered an old poem in the "Sovremennik" for 1855-56; it bore the title, "The Venus of

Milo" and had apparently been written by Mr. A. Fet.* I once knew this poem by heart, but now I could not remember it all and recalled only disconnected lines. I recall "*Shining naked to the loins, the laughing body flowers in unfading beauty*"; "*Caressed by the sea-foam*", or was it "*stilled by languor alone*"? Finally, another line came to me: "And all *seething* (or perhaps something else) with Paphian (I may have got that wrong too) passion". That is all I remember, but the picture given by these lines—"seething with passion ... laughing body ... with sea foam" or "with languor alone", "flowers with unfading beauty"—all this was so different from my feelings that I even found it laughable.

Indeed, every time I felt an irresistible need to smooth out my soul and go to the Louvre to see "if everything was all right there", I never understood so clearly how bleak, bad and bitter it was for man to live in this world at that moment. No clever book portraying the contemporary human society helped me to understand so vividly, in such condensed form and so very clearly, the misery of the human soul, the misery of all human society, all human systems, as did one look at that marble enigma. True, I still cannot find any connection between the enigma that was smoothing out my soul and the thought of how bleak was man's life, a thought that appeared directly after the sensations generated by the enigma, but I know positively from my own experience that at the very moment when I feel

* The poem in question, "The Venus of Milo", was written by Afanasi Fet (1820–1892) in 1856.

*Chastely, fearlessly,
Shining naked to the loins,
The divine body flowers
In unfading loveliness.
Under the shadow
Of lightly upswept hair,
How much proud languour
Imbues the heavenly countenance!
Thus, breathing Paphian passion,
Caressed all over by the foam of the sea
And radiating all-conquering might,
You gaze before you into eternity.*

(Literal translation by Alex Miller)

"smoothed out", I invariably begin to think how unhappy is mankind, I imagine all the unhappiness of the noisy street outside the walls of the Louvre, and involuntarily, in the context of that "human misery", I begin to assemble all that I have experienced, seen and heard up to the last minute inclusive of today, but I do not feel it in the least possible to concentrate for even one minute on any particularities of the specifically *feminine* in the enigma I am contemplating.

Is not it unfathomable just *why* you don't think that before you is something to do with a body, but, on the contrary, why you think, for instance, that Ivan Ivanovich Polumrakov, in saying that this lackey in spite of his lackeyhood had nevertheless preserved the human being in himself, definitely did not understand the pernicious things he was babbling. What! A human being and a lackey? A human being, and forced to serve plates? This *human being* unprotestingly obeys your whims to earn three sous for sustenance? That is how Ivan Ivanovich's phrase "of human worth" suddenly acquired a new meaning after one more look at the enigma which compelled me feel the joy of being aware of myself as a human being.

Yesterday I could perhaps have rejoiced more with Ivan Ivanovich that this woman of the streets is preserving her "human dignity", but *now* I cannot grasp how it could have been possible to permit human dignity or a human being to be so profoundly outraged. A human being and to dare to shame one so. A human being, yet to make one so unhappy, to crumple one up like that, to befoul one with such dirt!

No, it is not the "human truth" that I see before me now, not the "truth" to which humanity has lived to see, in Ivan Ivanovich's words, but the most terrible "untruth", and never was that "untruth" clearer to me than now. I now also see as degraded and shamed the human being in the form of that London rich man, one glance at whom gave Ivan Ivanovich the opportunity to say that there was nothing false in all his breeding and nature. That high-bred type now seemed to me the degradation of man. How was it possible to reduce a human being to such a type, to a spiritual state that could not even understand what kind of odious rabble is scuttling about the wheels of his vehicle?

How was it possible to reduce other human beings to such nonentities, condemning themselves to penal servitude, to starvation, to filth, to infinite spiritual despair? All this is frightful untruth for humankind; in all these different cases it can be seen only that the "human being" is crumpled up, maimed by the need to degrade oneself to slavery, to selling one's body, to want to lay hands on oneself, to want to end another life by killing one's own kind, to rob others and, finally, to put on a show of rare charity. In all this, that is to say, in everything that the eye meets, there is degradation, the trampling down of man by man... And I became terrified for the lot of the contemporary *human being*, for the maimed, and therefore permanent anguish of the soul... And I thought of all this thanks to the "marble enigma"; it "smoothed out" in me the crumpled human soul and introduced me, I don't know how and in what way, to the joy and breadth of that sensation.

Not the "laughing body" and not the "foam" and not "seething" and not "shining"—clearly it is not they that smooth out the human soul; clearly, the author of the poem not only did not absorb all the vastness of the impression, he did not even touch the edge of it; tempted, as it were, by Venus' "status", could not resist celebrating *feminine* beauty and, without the slightest foundation, compelled what was not laughing to laugh, what was not luxuriating to luxuriate, and what was not seething to seethe. Indeed, how was he to portray the charm of feminine beauty (after all this is Venus) except by extolling the body, except by making the spectator's feelings melt with it, making it luxuriate, making it surge with passion. With what lines, with what colours was he to portray that divine feminine beauty? And Mr Fet extolled all this so accurately, and altogether so wrongly, that is, he had no right whatever to extoll only *that*.

Indeed, concerning feminine beauty, the beauty of the female body and its "unfading charm", then the mere fact that the Venus of Milo is an armless cripple does not allow the poet to "melt"; yet right here in the corridor leading to the Venus of Milo, here, near the other "Venuses", of which there are so many, the spectator may indeed reflect on the nakedness of the body; there the feminine form,

picked out most accurately, strikes the eyes before anything: it is indeed appropriate for these also famous Venuses to luxuriate, and to seethe, and to flaunt the laughing body, and eyes, and hands, in that Paphian manner portraying the gestures of modesty... There, with "those Venuses", the connoisseur of "feminine charms" will find something to look at and melt over—but here? Only take a look, please, at this face! When the beauty of the feminine face is concerned, is it possible to witness living examples now, at this very moment, nearby, in the Champs Elysées? Yes, indeed, on this very Champs Elysées you may meet laughing bodies whose femininity is perceived by the watchful even from afar, although there is no nakedness to be seen and everything is covered in the most decorous manner. Here, in those Parisian Venuses, this part is exceptionally elaborated. But this one? Look, I repeat, at that nose, at that brow, at those..., sorry to admit almost peasant-like curls at the temples... Now, at this very moment, thousands upon thousands of ladies can be found in Paris who can knock spots off the Venus of Milo as far as laughing body is concerned.

Little by little, I finally convinced myself that Mr Fet, without any reasons, solely under the influence of the word "Venus", which obliged him to extoll feminine charms, extolled what in the Venus of Milo is not even a tiny fraction of the general vastness of the impression she makes. Indeed, if the artist had wanted to strike us with the beauty of the feminine body (which, according to Mr Fet, luxuriates and flowers and laughs, and bubbles with passion), why did he swathe that body "to the loins"? If it's a body, then let's have it all, entire; then even a heel, shining with "unfading beauty", should impress ordinary mortals. There are new French sculptures here, they not only portray "beauty" but also "Truth", "Mercy", "Despair"—they represent everything in its most naked form. You read "Truth" in the catalogue, but the eyes are not looking that way at all... "Despair" ... you go up, you look, and you think about anything except "despair", you think, "there's a woman for you ... stretching out like a Beluga sturgeon."

But here, having set himself the task of dazzling us with the unfading beauty of the female body, laughing, bubbling, luxuriating, he goes and wraps nearly all of it up, to the very

loins. What does this mean? What guided the artist? But that is not all: having swathed the body of his creation "to the loins", what feminine beauty has he given to face, brow, nose and expression of the eyes?

However thoroughly you analyse this great creation from the viewpoint of "feminine charms", you will be convinced at every step that the creator of this work of art had some other, higher goal.

Yes, he covered his creation (or it seems to me) to the loins in order not to let the spectator have the usual cliché thoughts, limited by the cliché ideas of feminine beauty.

For the people of his own time, and for all times, and all peoples, he needed eternally and inviolably to impress in hearts and minds the beauty of *human* existence, to familiarise mankind—men, women, children and the aged—with the happiness of being *human*, to show to all of us and delight us with the possibility visible to all, of being beautiful—that is the great purpose that obsessed his mind and guided his hand.

He took what he needed, both in male and in female beauty, not thinking about sex, nor even, perhaps, about age, and catching in all this only what was human; from this multiform material he created the truth in man that is the meaning of all his work; that which now, at this moment, *is not* in anyone or anything anywhere, but *is* at the same time in *each* human at present like a crumpled glove and not one that has been smoothed out.

And he thought of when, how and in what way the human being will be straightened out to the point predicted by the marble enigma, without solving the problem, nonetheless describes the infinite perspectives of human perfection, of the human future, and engenders in the heart a never-ending sorrow for the imperfection of present-day humankind.

The artist has created for you a model of a human being which you, considering yourself a human being and living in a modern human society, decidedly cannot imagine as capable of taking the slightest part in that order of life which you have lived to see. Your mind rejects the idea of placing that human being in any of the present situations without its beauty being violated. But since to violate this beauty,

to crumple it up, to deform it so that it becomes a contemporary human type is unthinkable and impossible, then your thought as you grieve about the infinite "vale of tears" of the present cannot help being borne away by dream into an infinitely radiant future. And the desire to smooth out, to emancipate the maimed contemporary man for this bright future, even though it has no definite outlines, arises joyously in the soul.

IV

And so I too, Tyapushkin, condemned by my whole life not to live a life of my own, but to disappear, to be lost in a task not mine, but the difficult one of my neighbour, was profoundly happy that a great work of art was fortifying me in my desire at that time to go away to the unenlightened masses of the people. Now, thanks to everything that great work of art taught me, I know that it is within my capacity and I can and must "go there".

I shall go there and I shall endeavour that the human beings, the people, who are beginning to live, should not allow themselves to be reduced to the level of the "real truth" that so delighted Ivan Ivanovich in Europe! There is indeed a lot to be tormented, not so much as to preserve one's human worth as a lackey, a banker, a beggar or a cocotte, but to reduce oneself to the level of tolerating all those monstrosities.

...About four years later, I was in Paris again and once more I "craved" to feel the "joy" of existence, to visit the Louvre; but alas, I could not do so; I was again crumpled up by the powerful, implacable hand of reality and felt that this time I could not be smoothed out... I made an effort to go to the Louvre; I even went as far as the doors, but simply felt ashamed to go inside. "Why go in there and disturb her to no purpose? Nothing will come of it anyway..." I stood there a while and went into the Russian library to feed myself on newspaper reports about hail-damaged crops and bad harvests.

And here I am again—but where? In a remote, snow-bound village, in a nasty, inhospitable hut, in the darkness

and misery of an indescribably wearisome winter's night, I have remembered that joyous moment and have come to life again. There are occasions when the limbs recover after a stroke of paralysis. Now I am making every effort to retain that awakened feeling as long as possible. I shall buy myself a photograph and hang it up there on the wall. When I feel depressed and drained of my strength by country life, I shall look at her, remembering everything and ... I shall get such an "ovation" for the district official Poluptichkin, that he will begin scribbling denunciations of me with a pen in each hand! ..

1885

Translated by Alex Miller

NIKOLAI LESKOV

(1831–1895)

Nikolai Leskov was a writer who pondered on the destinies of Russia, on her greatness and poverty, and on the tangle of unresolved contradictions which involved all the strata of Russian society.

In later life (the 80s and 90s) Leskov arrived at the conclusion that the contradictions existing between the moral standards and the ossified social relations were irreconcilable. This is evidenced by his story "The Sentry" based on an actual happening, an incident testifying to the absurdity of the system under which natural human feelings and relationships were grossly violated. The sentry's perfectly moral and Christian deed is qualified as a threat to the principles of the state system. He has gone against the letter of the law, and that is reason enough to cruelly punish this man, who deserves praise and gratitude. However, since according to the same law, someone has to be rewarded for rescuing a drowning man, this reward is given to a rogue. The sentry's superior officers, who must decide what is to be done about

him, approve of his deed in private, but once they become cogs in the vast machine they feel compelled to adopt absurd decisions, and as a result, Miller, really a kind-hearted man, not only directs the flogging but actually watches to make sure that the sentry is "properly done".

As a result, everyone is satisfied: the rogue who has been awarded the medal, the officials who have managed to keep the "breach of the regulations" from the Tsar, and the cruelly flogged sentry himself. Such are the lengths, the author shows, to which the process of dehumanisation of all and sundry has gone.

In 1894, a year before he died, in an interview to a newspaper, Leskov thus formulated his literary credo: "I love literature as a means whereby I can voice everything which I consider to be true and good; if I cannot do this, literature has no further value to me: to look upon it as art is not my point of view."

*THE SENTRY**

(1839)

CHAPTER ONE

The happening, an account of which is given below for the kind attention of readers, was of pathetic and awful significance to the principal heroic character of the story, and the denouement was so original that nothing like it could have occurred anywhere except in Russia.

This is partly a court and partly a historical anecdote, and it characterises rather well the mores and drift of the 'thirties of the present century, a very curious epoch although mention of it is extremely poor.

There is not a word of untruth in this story.

CHAPTER TWO

In the winter of 1839, just before Twelfth tide, there was a great thaw in St. Petersburg. There was so much wet as if spring were really coming ahead of time; the snow was melting and dripping from the roofs in the daytime, and on the river the ice had turned blue and oozed water. There were large patches of unfrozen water on the Neva, right in front of the Winter Palace. The wind was warm and western, but very strong: it chased water into the river from the sea, and guns were fired to give warning of a possible flood.

Guard duty at the palace was borne by the Izmailovsky Regiment, commanded by Nikolai Ivanovich Miller, a brilliantly educated young officer (eventually a full general and director of the Lycée) with a good standing in society. He was a man with a so-called "humane" turn of mind, which had long been noticed and which slightly prejudiced his career.

Actually, Miller was a sound and reliable officer, and the palace guard at that time ran no hazards whatsoever. The time could not be more quiet and untroubled. All that the palace guard was required to do was stand riveted to their posts, and yet it was when Captain Miller's turn came to take charge of the watch that there occurred the extraordinary and alarming happening which is hardly remembered now by the few of his surviving contemporaries.

CHAPTER THREE

At first, everything went well: the sentries were assigned to their posts and stationed, and everything was in perfect order. The Emperor was well, he took a ride in the evening, and on return home went to bed. The palace also went to sleep. A beautifully peaceful night descended. Silence reigned in the guardroom. Captain Miller pinned his white handkerchief to the tall and traditionally greasy back of the officer's leather armchair, and sat down with a book to pass the time.

Captain Miller had always been an avid reader, and so he did not mind the solitude, he sat and read, never noticing the passing of the hours. And then, suddenly, at about two o'clock in the morning, the peace was rudely shattered: the corporal of the guard, pale and shaking with fear, stood before him and mumbled:

"Trouble, sir, trouble! "

"What's wrong?"

"A terrible disaster! "

Unutterably alarmed, Miller jumped to his feet. It was no simple matter, however, to discover what exactly the corporal meant by "trouble" and "terrible disaster".

CHAPTER FOUR

What had happened was this: the sentry, Private Postnikov of the Izmailovsky regiment, standing watch outside the palace, at the Jordan entrance, heard someone floundering in the unfrozen patch on the Neva, precisely in front of

where he stood, and desperately shouting for help.

Private Postnikov, a former household serf, was a high-strung and very sensitive man. He listened for a long time to the shouts and moans of the drowning man and went numb with horror. He looked about him, to right and left, but there was not a living soul in sight either on the Neva or along the whole visible length of the embankment.

There was no one there to rescue the drowning man, and drown he definitely would.

How terribly long and stubbornly he was struggling!

One would think that by now he'd give up the struggle and sink, but not he! His gasping moans and shouts for help would break off for a moment, and then they could be heard once again and, what's more, they sounded nearer and nearer to the palace embankment. Obviously he had not lost his head or his bearings yet and was coming straight at the light of the street lamps, only he would drown just the same, of course, because in his path lay the hole cut in the ice for Twelfthtide.* There, he'd dive under the ice and that would be the end of him. Now he fell silent once again, and the next moment he could be heard splashing and moaning: "Help! Help! " he was so near now that the sentry could hear the splashes as he floundered in the water.

Postnikov reasoned that rescuing that man would be extremely easy. If he ran down to the ice now, the man would be right there. Just throw him a rope, or hand him a stick or a rifle to catch hold of, and he'd be saved. He was so near that he could seize it and jump out. But Postnikov remembered his duty and his oath; he was a sentry, and a sentry must never leave his sentry-box, not for any reason in the world.

On the other hand, his heart was misbehaving terribly, aching, and hammering, and sinking... Those moans and screams were turning it into such a nuisance that he could tear it out himself and throw it under his feet... It was terrible, of course, to hear someone drowning and not give him a helping hand when, in actual fact, he could easily do it because his sentry-box would not run away and nothing

* It was the custom to cut a hole in the ice of a frozen river to consecrate the water at the Twelfthtide service.

untoward would happen. "Shall I leave my post? Sure no one will see? O Lord, if it were only over! There, he's moaning again..."

In the half-hour while this went on Private Postnikov suffered such torments of indecision that he began to feel that his "mind was tottering". But he was an intelligent and dutiful soldier with a clear mind, and he knew perfectly well that for a sentry to desert his post was a crime for which he'd be immediately court-martialled, made to run the gauntlet, and then sentenced to hard labour or maybe even to death; but the moans from the swollen river were coming closer and closer, and he could already hear the man's gurgling and desperate floundering.

"I'm drowning! Help! "

In the next minute he'd come to the Twelfth tide ice hole, and that would be the end.

Postnikov took another look round him. Not a soul to be seen anywhere, nothing but the lanterns shaking and winking in the wind, while from the river the same wind brought this quavering scream ... perhaps the last one...

There was one more splash, one more cry, and then a plopping sound.

The sentry could not endure it any longer, and left his post.

CHAPTER FIVE

Postnikov rushed to the landing stage, ran down to the ice with a fast-beating heart, then into the water flowing over from the unfrozen patch, quickly saw where the man was thrashing and held out to him the butt of his rifle.

The drowning man grabbed hold of it, Postnikov pulled the rifle by the bayonet and hauled him out.

Both the rescued and the rescuer were wet through, and since the rescued was shivering and collapsing from exhaustion, Postnikov did not dare leave him on the ice, helped him up to the embankment and looked round for someone to hand him over to. In the meantime, a sledge appeared on the embankment, and in that sledge sat an officer of the Palace Invalid Company (since abolished).

This gentleman, arriving so inopportunately for Postnikov, seemed to be a very light-minded person, a bit of a muddle-head and bold as brass. He jumped down from his sledge and started questioning Postnikov:

"Who's that man? Who are you?"

"He was drowning, floundering," Postnikov began.

"Who was drowning? You were? And why here?"

The rescued man only sputtered in answer, and Postnikov had already slipped away with the rifle, and was back in the sentry-box.

Whether the officer had put two and two together or not remains unknown, only he did not ask any more questions, pulled the rescued man into his sledge and sped off with him to Morskaya Street, to the precinct of the Admiralty.

Here the officer made a formal report that the wet man he had brought along had been drowning in the unfrozen patch on the Neva exactly opposite the palace, and that he had rescued him at the risk of his own life.

The rescued man was still wet, freezing and falling off his feet. He was in a swoon from the fright and the terrible physical exertion, and so it made no difference to him who had rescued him.

A sleepy police feldsher bustled round him, while in the office a report was being compiled from the verbal statement of the Invalid Company officer, and the clerks, with the suspiciousness common to police people, wondered how the rescuer had not got wet himself. This officer, wishing to receive a medal "For Saving Life" explained this by a fortunate combination of circumstances, but his explanation was both clumsy and incredible. One of the clerks was sent to waken the police captain, others to ascertain the facts.

Meanwhile, other, swift currents were already swirling round this incident at the palace.

CHAPTER SIX

All the above-mentioned developments following the rescued man being sped off in the officer's sledge were not known in the guardroom. The Izmailovsky regiment officer and men only knew that their soldier, Private Postnikov,

had deserted the sentry-box and dashed to rescue a drowning man, and since this was a gross violation of military duty, Private Postnikov would be court-martialled and made to run the gauntlet, while all his superiors, from the company commander to the regimental commander, would be in for a deal of unpleasantness, and they could neither protest nor make any excuses for themselves.

Private Postnikov, wet and shivering, was naturally relieved at once and brought to the guardroom where he told Miller everything we already know, in all the particulars right up to the moment when the Invalid Company officer put the rescued man in his sledge and ordered his coachman to gallop to the Admiralty...

The danger was growing ever greater and more unavoidable. The Invalid Company officer would, naturally, tell everything to the police captain, and the police captain would immediately inform Chief-of-Police Kokoshkin who would report it to the Emperor in the morning, and the fat would be in the fire.

There was no time to waste on cogitation; senior officers had to be called in.

Nikolai Ivanovich Miller quickly despatched a message to Lieutenant-Colonel Svinyin, his battalion commander, begging him to come as soon as possible to the palace guardroom and do everything in his power to find a way out of the terrible disaster that had befallen them.

The time was already nearly three o'clock in the morning, and Kokoshkin always came to report to the Emperor at quite an early hour, so very little time was left in which to do all the deciding and acting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lieutenant-Colonel Svinyin did not have in him that compassion and soft-heartedness which had always distinguished Nikolai Ivanovich Miller: Svinyin was not a heartless man, but first and foremost he was a "stickler to duty" (a type that is nowadays again remembered with regret). Svinyin was notably strict and, what is more, he loved to show off the stiffness of the discipline he exacted. He did not relish

malice and never sought a pretext to cause anyone any unnecessary suffering, but he was implacable when there was the slightest violation of the regulations. He considered it inappropriate to stoop to a discussion of the motives whereby the culprit had been guided, and maintained the rule that in the service every breach of conduct was a crime. And so everyone on guard duty knew that whatever Postnikov was made to suffer for deserting his post, he would suffer, and Svinyin would not feel sorry for him.

It was as such that this staff officer was known to his superiors and his comrades, among whom there were people who did not see eye to eye with Svinyin, because "humanism" and other similar delusions had not been quite weeded out yet at the time. Svinyin did not care if the "humanists" condemned or praised him. Pleading with him or attempting to move him to pity was quite useless. He was hardened against such things, tempered as career makers were in those days, but then he too, like Achilles, had his vulnerable spot.

Svinyin's career had begun well, and naturally he fostered and protected it as if it were his full-dress uniform on which not a speck of dust should settle. And here this unfortunate escapade by a man from the battalion entrusted to him would certainly cast a shadow of doubt on the discipline of his entire company. Those on whom Svinyin's well-begun and carefully maintained career depended would not inquire into whether the battalion commander was at fault or not because one of his men deserted his post moved by the noblest compassion, and many would gladly trip him up so as to clear the way for a relative or give a leg up to a protégé of people in favour at the moment. The Emperor, of course, would become angry and be sure to say to the regimental commander that his "weaklings" of officers had let their men "get out of hand". And who was at fault? Svinyin. And everyone would go saying that Svinyin was a "weakling" and the reproach of weakness would very likely remain an indelible blot on his reputation. And then it would be a forlorn hope for him to distinguish himself among his contemporaries and leave his portrait in the gallery of Russia's historical figures.

Although the study of history was not a popular pursuit in those days, people believed in it and were more than willing to take a hand in making it up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When, at three o'clock in the morning, Svinyin received Captain Miller's alarming note, he jumped out of bed at once, dressed, and hastened to the Winter Palace guardroom in a state of fear and anger. Here, he immediately interrogated Private Postnikov and ascertained that the incredible happening had really occurred. Private Postnikov once again made a clean breast of everything, repeating to his battalion commander exactly what he had earlier told Captain Miller. The soldier said that he was "guilty before God and the Tsar without hope of mercy", that hearing the moans of a drowning man he had remained at his post in torment for a long time, fighting an inner battle between duty and compassion, and that finally he had succumbed and given up the struggle: he ran down to the ice, pulled the drowning man ashore, and there, as ill luck would have it, he was caught in the act by an officer of the Palace Invalid Company who was driving past.

Lieutenant-Colonel Svinyin was in despair; he gave himself the only possible satisfaction of venting his fury on Postnikov, whom he immediately despatched to the punishment cell under arrest, and then said a few biting things to Miller, reproaching him with his "humaneness" which was of no use at all in military service. Still, all this was not enough to set matters right. It was impossible to find an excuse, let alone justification, for a misdeed such as a sentry leaving his post, and the only way out was to keep the whole thing from the Emperor...

But could such a happening be kept in the dark?

Apparently it could not, since the rescue of the drowning man was known not just to the entire guard but also to that hateful Invalid officer who, by this time, had certainly brought the whole thing to the knowledge of General Koshkin.

Where run for help now? Appeal to whom? From whom seek support and protection?

Svinyin wanted to go at once to the Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich and tell him everything. Such manoeuvres were practised in those days. Never mind if the Grand Duke lost his temper and shouted at him; his fiery nature and his custom were such that the sharper and even hurtful the things he said in the heat of the moment, the sooner he would cool off and himself speak up for the culprit. Instances of this were not few, and sometimes they were actually provoked. "Scoldings don't last forever", and Svinyin would have liked to follow this safe course, but could he enter the palace in the middle of the night and disturb the Grand Duke? But if he came to him in the morning, after Kokoshkin had made his report to the Emperor, it would be too late. And as Svinyin fretted amidst all those difficulties, he unhardened, and his mind began to see light, or rather another way out which until then had been hidden from him in a fog.

CHAPTER NINE

Among other well-known military moves there is this one: when the greatest danger threatens from the walls of the besieged fortress, the attackers must on no account withdraw, but must make straight for the walls and hug them. And so Svinyin decided to do none of the things that had occurred to him at first, and instead go straight to Kokoshkin that very minute.

Many horrifying and absurd things were said about Chief of Police Kokoshkin in St. Petersburg at the time, but people also said that the tact he possessed was so amazingly versatile that it helped him to make a molehill out of a mountain as facilely as he made a mountain out of a molehill.

Kokoshkin was in truth a very stern and wrathful man, he inspired fear in everyone, but was sometimes indulgent with naughty officers, merrymakers who meant no harm. There were very many of them about in those days, and time and again they found in him a powerful and assiduous protector. By and large, there was much he could and knew how to do, if he wanted to. Both Svinyin and Captain Miller knew this

about him. Miller supported his battalion commander's audacious plan to go at once to Kokoshkin and trust in his generosity and his "versatile tact" which would probably tell him how to wriggle out of this unfortunate business without angering the Emperor, which, to do Kokoshkin justice, he always did his best to avoid.

Svinyin put on his greatcoat, raised his eyes heavenward, sighed: "O Lord, o Lord! " and went to Kokoshkin.

This was already after four in the morning.

CHAPTER TEN

Chief of Police Kokoshkin was aroused and informed that Svinyin had come to see him on a matter of extremely urgent importance.

Kokoshkin got up at once and emerged from his bedroom in a dressing gown, yawning, shivering and rubbing his forehead. He heard out Svinyin very attentively and calmly. As he listened to the lengthy explanations and pleas for clemency he only asked one question:

"Did the sentry leave his post and rescue that man?"

"Yes, sir," replied Svinyin.

"And the sentry-box?"

"It remained empty."

"Hm... I knew that it remained empty. I'm very glad it wasn't stolen."

From this Svinyin became even more convinced that the whole thing was already known to Kokoshkin and that, of course, he had made up his mind in what light he would present it to the Emperor in his morning report, and that he was not going to change his mind. Otherwise an exigency such as a sentry on palace guard leaving his post should have undoubtedly alarmed the energetic Chief of Police far more.

But Kokoshkin did not know anything. The police captain to whom the Invalid officer came with the rescued man did not think it a matter of any great importance. To his mind it was not at all the kind of occurrence that warranted disturbing the tired Chief of Police in the middle of the night, and for another thing the rescue itself appeared somewhat suspicious, seeing that the clothes of the Invalid offi-

cer were perfectly dry, which they could not have been if he had rescued the drowning man with a risk to his own life. To the police captain this officer seemed merely an ambitious liar who wanted to pin another medal on his chest, and so while the clerk was writing out the statement, he kept the officer talking and tried to get at the truth by probing him about the minutest details.

It was not a very pleasant thing for the police captain that the incident happened in his district and that it was not a policeman but a palace officer who had pulled out the drowning man.

As for Kokoshkin's calm reception of the news, it was explained very simply: first, by his feeling terribly tired after a full day's bustle and, after that, earlier in the night, having to participate in putting out two fires; and secondly, by the fact that the misdeed performed by sentry Postnikov did not directly concern him, the Chief of Police.

Still, Kokoshkin did what was necessary at once. He sent for the Admiralty police captain and ordered him to return at once together with the Invalid officer and the rescued man, and asked Svinyin to wait in the small anteroom to his office. This done, Kokoshkin retired into his office, leaving the door open, sat down at his desk with the intention of signing some papers, but instantly his head dropped and he fell fast asleep in his chair.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At that time there were no city telegraphs or telephones as yet, and when orders from high up had to be urgently delivered "forty thousand messengers" were sent galloping in all directions just as they have been perpetuated in Gogol's comedy.

Needless to say, this was not as quick as the telegraph or the telephone, but then it livened up the town considerably and testified to the indefatigable vigilance of the authorities.

By the time the breathless Admiralty police captain returned with the rescuer and the rescued, General Kokoshkin—highly strung and energetic—had had his nap and felt refreshed, as was apparent from the expression on his face

and the display of his mental and spiritual faculties.

Kokoshkin summoned the arrivals into his office, and invited Svinyin to come in with them.

"Statement?" Kokoshkin asked the police captain in a brisk, refreshed voice.

The police captain silently handed him a sheet of paper, folded in two, and whispered:

"I must ask Your Excellency to permit me to say a few words in private..."

"Very well."

Kokoshkin walked away to the window alcove, and the police captain followed.

"What is it?"

Those in the room heard the indistinct whispering of the police captain and the distinct grunting of the general.

"Hm... Yes... Well, and what of it?... Could be... With their sort it's water off a duck's back... Nothing else?"

"Nothing, sir."

The general returned from the window alcove, sat down at his desk and started reading. He read the statement through, his face revealing neither fear nor doubt, and then addressed himself directly to the rescued man in a loud, firm voice:

"How did you get into that patch of unfrozen water opposite the palace, my man?"

"I'm sorry," replied the rescued man.

"I should say so! Were you drunk?"

"Not drunk, but I'd had a few."

"Why did you go into the water?"

"I wanted to go the short way across the ice, but I strayed into the water."

"So, you couldn't see straight?"

"It was dark, Your Excellency, dark all round."

"Too dark for you to see who pulled you out?"

"I saw nothing, sorry, Your Excellency. It was that gentleman, I think," he pointed to the Invalid officer, and added: "I couldn't see properly, I was that scared."

"That's the whole trouble that you go gadding about when you ought to be asleep in bed! Now, take a good look at your benefactor and remember him always. A noble man who risked his life for you! "

"I shall remember till my dying day."

"Your name, sir?"

The Invalid officer named himself.

"Do you hear?"

"I'm listening, Your Excellency."

"Do you go to church?"

"I do, Your Excellency."

"Put this gentleman's name down in your prayer book."*

"I will, Your Excellency."

"Remember him in your prayers, and now get out, I don't need you any more."

The man bowed to the floor and rushed out, too happy for words that they had let him go.

Svinyin stood and marvelled at the turn things had taken by the grace of God.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kokoshkin now addressed the Invalid officer:

"You rescued that man at the risk of your life?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"There were no witnesses and there could not have been owing to the lateness of the hour?"

"It was dark, Your Excellency, and there was no one on the embankment, only the sentries."

"Sentries don't count: a sentry stands guard at his post and must not be diverted by anything extraneous. I believe what the statement says. It was taken down from your words, wasn't it?"

Kokoshkin pronounced these words with a peculiar stress, making them sound like a threat or a sharp reproof.

The Invalid officer, however, was not abashed and, popping his eyes and thrusting out his chest, replied:

"From my words and perfectly correct, Your Excellency."

* *Prayer book*: in the old days, Russians kept small books in which half of the pages were headed GOD BLESS followed by the Christian names of their living relatives, friends, etc. and half of the pages headed REST IN PEACE, followed by the names of deceased relatives and friends. Names were added as required, the books were handed in to the church and read from in thanksgiving or else in memorial services.—Tr.

"Your action merits a reward."

The officer quickly bowed in gratitude.

"Don't thank me," said Kokoshkin. "I shall inform His Imperial Majesty of your selfless action, and perhaps this very day a medal will adorn your chest. You may go home now, take a warm drink and do not leave the house because you may be needed."

The Invalid officer beamed, bowed and left.

Kokoshkin followed him with his eyes and said:

"It's quite possible that the Emperor will wish to see him himself."

"Yes sir," said the police captain understandingly.

"You, too, may go."

The police captain went out, closed the door behind him, and true to his pious habit quickly crossed himself.

The Invalid officer was waiting for him downstairs, and they set off together as much better friends than when they arrived.

In the office of the Chief of Police there remained only Svinyin; Kokoshkin first gave him a long, intent look, and then asked:

"Have you been to the Grand Duke?"

At the time everyone knew that the Grand Duke meant Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich.

"I came straight to you," replied Svinyin.

"Who is the officer of the guard?"

"Captain Miller."

Kokoshkin again looked at Svinyin intently, and then said:

"I believe you told me something quite different before."

Svinyin had no idea what Kokoshkin meant, and said nothing.

"Well, never mind. Sleep well."

The audience was over.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At one o'clock in the afternoon the Invalid officer was sent for by Kokoshkin who announced to him, in very gracious tones, that His Majesty was well pleased to learn that

among the officers of the Invalid Company of his palace there were such vigilant and self-sacrificing men, and granted him a medal "For Saving Life". Thereupon Kokoshkin himself presented him with the medal, and the officer salied forth to show it off. The matter, therefore, could be considered closed, but Lieutenant-Colonel Svinin felt some inconclusiveness in it and deemed himself bound to put the *points sur les i*.

He was so troubled that he stayed ill in bed for three days, and on the fourth day he got up, went to church, ordered a thanksgiving service sung before the icon of the Saviour, returned home with his soul at peace, and sent for Captain Miller.

"Well, Nikolai Ivanovich, thank God the storm cloud which hung over us has quite blown over, and our unfortunate affair with the sentry has been settled. Now, it seems, we can draw an easy breath. We are indebted for this, without a doubt, first to God's mercy, and second to General Kokoshkin. Let people say that he is unkind and heartless, I, for one, am filled with gratitude for his magnanimity and esteem for his resourcefulness and tact. He made amazingly clever use of the boastfulness of that Invalid rogue who, truth to tell, should be given a good whipping at the stables for his impudence and not a medal, but there was nothing for it: he had to be used to save many others, and Kokoshkin handled the matter so cleverly that there was no unpleasantness for anyone, rather the contrary, everyone was very happy and pleased. Between you and me, it has been passed on to me through a trustworthy person that Kokoshkin himself is *very pleased* with me. This is because I did not go anywhere else and came straight to him, and also because I did not argue with that rogue who got the medal. In short, no one has suffered any harm, and everything was done with such tact that there is nothing more to fear, but we ourselves have been somewhat remiss. We must also follow Kokoshkin's example with tact and on our part put the finishing touch on the affair to safeguard ourselves, just in case, against any possible consequences. There is one person whose position has to be decided one way or another. I am speaking of Private Postnikov. He is still in the punishment cell under arrest, and undoubtedly he is impatient to know

what awaits him. We have to put an end to his tormenting uncertainty."

"Ah yes, high time," said Miller gladly.

"And, of course, it's best for you to do it. Please go at once to the barracks, rally your company, have Private Postnikov released and punish him with two hundred birch strokes before the ranks."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Miller was dismayed and made an attempt to persuade Svinyin to take mercy on Postnikov, now that everything had ended so happily for everyone, and forgive him, since he had already suffered enough, locked up in the cell and awaiting his fate. Svinyin, however, flushed angrily and cut Miller short.

"No," he said. "Drop the idea. I've just been talking to you about tact, and here you start being tactless! Drop the very idea! "

Svinyin changed to a more formal, dry tone, and continued:

"And since you yourself are not quite right in this matter and, in fact, are very much at fault because you have this softness in you not befitting a military man, and because this shortcoming of yours is reflected in the discipline of your subordinates, I am ordering you to be present at the punishment and to insist that the whipping should be done earnestly ... as severely as possible. So be good enough to see that is done by young soldiers who have just arrived from the army, because our old soldiers are all infected with the Guards' liberalism where corporal punishment is concerned. They don't flog a comrade properly, they merely wave the switches behind his back, it wouldn't frighten off a flea. I'll come and see for myself how the culprit has been *done*."

Whatever the orders issued by a superior officer, they were not to be evaded, of course, and kind-hearted Captain Miller had to carry out to the letter the order he had received from his battalion commander.

The company was lined up in front of the Izmailovsky regiment barracks, birch switches were fetched from the

stores in ample quantity, and Private Postnikov, brought out from the punishment cell, was properly *done* by the newly arrived, assiduous young soldiers. These young men who had not been corrupted with the Guards' liberalism did a perfect job of dotting all the i's on his body, as laid down by his battalion commander. The punishment finished, Postnikov was carried away to the regimental hospital on the same greatcoat on which he had lain for the flogging.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On receiving the report that the punishment had been meted out, battalion commander Svinyin immediately went to pay a fatherly visit on Postnikov in the hospital, and was gratified to see with his own eyes that his orders had been carried out to perfection. The compassionate and highly-strung Postnikov had been *done properly*. Svinyin was pleased, and ordered the chastised man to be given a pound of sugar and a quarter of a pound of tea from himself personally, to make his recuperation all the sweeter. Postnikov, lying on his cot, heard him give the order, and said:

"Much pleased, your honour, thank you for your fatherly kindness."

And he was indeed "pleased" because those three days in the punishment cell had prepared him for something much worse. Two hundred strokes meant very little in that day of strong measures, compared with the punishments court-martialled men had to bear; and it was precisely that kind of punishment Postnikov would have been sentenced to, if all those bold and tactical evolutions, which have been related here, had not taken place.

Still, the number of people who were pleased with the outcome does not stop here.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The story of Private Postnikov's feat spread in a whisper to the various circles of the capital which in those days of press voicelessness lived in an atmosphere of endless gossip.

In the oral rendering of the story the name of the hero—soldier Postnikov—became mislaid, but then the feat itself was greatly inflated and assumed a fascinating, romantic character.

It was said that a mysterious swimmer had been making for the palace from the direction of the Peter and Paul Fortress when one of the palace sentries fired at the man and wounded him; a passing Invalid Company officer then jumped into the water and rescued him, for which he received his due reward, and the sentry his due punishment. This rumour reached the monastic hostelry where, at the time, lived the Metropolitan, a cautious man who had a weakness for “worldly” news and whose gracious favour was enjoyed by the devout Svinyin family.

The perspicacious priest found that the story was wanting in clarity. Who was that swimmer? If he was an escaped prisoner, why punish the sentry who fired at him in the performance of his duty, as the man was swimming across the Neva from the Fortress? But if he was not an escaped prisoner but some mysterious person who had to be rescued from the water, how could the sentry know about him? And then again, there was a discrepancy in the gossips’ presentation of the incident. In secular society a great deal is taken for granted with amazing light-mindedness and made the subject of idle talk, but people living in monasteries and monastic hostelries treat everything much more seriously and know the real truth about worldly matters.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Once, when Svinyin came to the Metropolitan to receive his blessing, his reverend host brought up the subject of the sentry firing that shot. Svinyin told him the whole truth which, as we know, was quite unlike the story people were spreading about.

The Metropolitan heard out the true story in silence, gently fingering his white beads and never taking his eyes off the speaker. When Svinyin had finished, the Metropolitan uttered in his softly purling speech:

“Therefore it must be concluded that not everything and

not everywhere was told in conformity with the truth?" Svinyin hesitated and then replied evasively that it was not he but General Kokoshkin who made the report.

In silence, the Metropolitan ran the beads through his waxen fingers several times, and then uttered:

"One must distinguish between a lie and an incomplete truth."

Again he fingered his beads in silence, and at last pronounced in his softly purling tones:

"An incomplete truth is not a lie. But the least said about it the better."

"That is so," spoke Svinyin, feeling encouraged. "What worries me most of all, of course, is that I had to punish this soldier who, albeit he had neglected his duty..."

He was interrupted by the clear and softly flowing speech:

"Duty must never be neglected."

"Yes, but he did it because of the goodness of his heart, out of compassion, and, besides, with such a struggle and at such a risk: he realised that by saving the life of this other man he was ruining his own... He was moved by a lofty, holy feeling! "

"Leave the holy to God, and as for punishment inflicted on the body of a commoner, it is never fatal and goes against neither the customs of peoples nor the spirit of the Holy Scripture. A whipping inflicted on a coarse body is borne far more easily than a refined suffering of the spirit. In this respect you did not prejudice fairness at all."

"But he has been deprived of the reward for saving life."

"Saving life is a duty, not a merit. He who could have rescued the man and had not done so is punishable by law, and he who has rescued him has done his duty."

A pause, the fingering of beads, and again the soft voice:

"It may do a soldier far more good to suffer humiliation and wounds for the performance of his duty than to boast of a medal. What is most important in this matter is to exercise caution and never mention anywhere what has been said to anyone and in what connection."

Evidently, the Metropolitan was also pleased.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

If I had the audacity of heaven's fortunate chosen to whom, for their great faith, it has been given to penetrate the secrets of Providence, I would perhaps make so bold as to assume that God Himself was probably pleased with the behaviour of Postnikov, the meek soul he had created. But my faith is little, it does not give my mind the power to see so high; I keep to things mundane and simple. I think of those mortals who love goodness simply for its own sake and expect no rewards from anywhere for doing good. These straightforward and reliable people should also be quite pleased, I believe, with the sacred impulse of love and the no less sacred patience of the meek hero of my true and artless story.

1887

Translated by Olga Shartse

LEV TOLSTOY

(1828–1910)

In 1978 the whole world marked the 150th birth anniversary of the great Russian writer Lev Tolstoy. For 60 years of his life he wrote, with tireless dedication, and left us an enormous legacy: the novels "War and Peace" (1863–1869), "Anna Karenina" (1873–1877), "Resurrection" (1889–1899), hundreds of short stories, the plays: "The Power of Darkness" (1886), "The Fruits of Enlightenment" (1886–1890), "A Living Corpse" (1900), a great number of articles and literary criticisms, and a treatise on art.

Tolstoy's writing marked a new stage in the development of artistic thought in general. In Tolstoy's realism we find such traits peculiar to him as narration in the form of a confession, a destructively powerful and uncompromising exposure of social contradictions, and an irreconcilable rejection of the existing state system and church.

Like no other writer, Tolstoy was loved by his contemporaries and held in great esteem. Anton Chekhov wrote on January 28, 1900: "I dread the thought that Tolstoy will die one day. If he were to die, there'd be a great void in my life. First, I have never loved anyone as I love him... Second, when there's a Lev Tolstoy in literature, it's easy and pleasant to be a writer; even the knowledge that you have not

done anything and will not do anything is not so awful, because Tolstoy does enough for all of us. All the hopes pinned on literature are justified by his work. Third, Tolstoy stands so firmly on his feet, his prestige is so immense that while he lives such things as bad taste in literature, brazen or else tearful shoddiness, and all those bristling, embittered self-conceits, will stay far and deep in the shadow. Only his moral authority is capable of keeping the so-called literary moods and currents on a dignified level. Without him, there would be a shepherdless herd, or a muddle which no one could sort out." And here is what Maxim Gorky wrote: "He is amazingly great, that man, the vitality of his spirit is so astonishing that you believe there could not possibly be another like him." And Romain Rolland: "For us he is not an arrogant teacher of life, one of those haughty geniuses who, shutting themselves into the sphere of their art and thought, elevate themselves above mortal mankind. He is our brother, as he himself liked to call himself in his letters. So let us repeat after him this most beautiful and human of all words—brother! "

Lenin said about Tolstoy: "...the genius who has not only drawn incomparable pictures of Russian life but has made first-class contributions to world literature."

AFTER THE BALL

"So you contend a man cannot judge independently of what is good and what is bad, that it is all a matter of environment—that man is a creature of environment. But I contend it is all a matter of chance. And here is what I can say about myself..."

This is what our respected friend Ivan Vasilyevich said at the conclusion of a discussion we had been having about the necessity of changing the environment, the conditions in which men live, before there could be any talk about the improvement of the individual. As a matter of fact, no one had said it was impossible to judge independently of the good and the bad, but Ivan Vasilyevich had a habit of answering thoughts of his own stimulated by a discussion, and recounting experiences from his own life suggested by these thoughts. Often he became so absorbed in the story that he forgot his reason for telling it, especially since he always spoke with great fervour and sincerity. That is precisely what happened in the present case.

"At least I can make this claim with regard to myself. My own life has been moulded in that way and no other—not by environment, but by something quite different."

"By what?" we asked.

"That is a long story. If you are to understand, I must tell it all to you."

"Then do."

Ivan Vasilyevich considered a moment and shook his head.

"Yes," he said, "my whole life was changed by a single night, or rather, a morning."

"Why? What happened?"

"It happened that I was deeply in love. I had often been in love before, but never so deeply. It took place a long time

ago—her daughters are married women by this time. Her name was B., Varenka B. She was still strikingly beautiful at fifty, but in her youth, when she was eighteen, she was a dream: tall, slender, graceful, and majestic—yes, majestic. She always held herself as erect as if she were unable to bend, with her head tipped slightly backward; this, combined with her beauty and height, even though she was so thin as to be almost bony, gave her a queenly air that would have been intimidating if it had not been for her gay, winning smile, her mouth, her glorious shining eyes, and her whole captivating, youthful being.”

“Ivan Vasilyevich certainly does lay it on thick! ”

“However thick I were to lay it on, I could not make you understand what she was really like. But that is beside the point. The events I shall recount took place in the forties.

“I was then a student at a provincial university. I don’t know whether it was a good or a bad thing but in those days there were none of your study circles, none of your theorizing, at our university; we were just young and lived in the way of young folk—studying and having a good time. I was a very gay and energetic youth, and rich in the bargain. I owned a spirited carriage horse and used to take the girls out for drives (skating had not yet become the fad); I went on drinking-parties with my fellow-students (in those days we drank nothing but champagne; if we were out of money, we drank nothing, for we never drank vodka as they do now); but most of all I enjoyed parties and balls. I was a good dancer and not exactly ugly.”

“Come, don’t be modest,” put in one of the listeners. “We’ve all seen your daguerreotype. You were a very handsome youth.”

“Perhaps I was, but that isn’t what I wanted to tell you. When my love was at its height I attended a ball given on the last day of Shrovetide by the Marshal of Nobility, a good-natured old man, wealthy, and fond of entertaining. His wife, as amiable as he was, stood beside him to receive us. She was wearing a velvet gown and a diamond tiara in her hair, and her ageing neck and shoulders, plump and white, were exposed, as in the portraits of Empress Yelizaveta Petrovna. The ball was magnificent. The ball-room was charming, there were famous serf singers and musicians be-

longing to a certain landowner who was a lover of music, the food was abundant, the champagne flowed in rivers. Much as I loved champagne, I did not drink—I was drunk with love. But I danced till I dropped. I danced quadrilles, and waltzes, and polonaises, and it goes without saying that I danced as many of them as I could with Varenka. She was wearing a white dress with a pink sash, white kid gloves that did not quite reach her thin, pointed elbows, and white satin slippers. A wretched engineer named Anisimov cheated me out of a mazurka with her. I have never forgiven him for that. He invited her the moment she entered the ball-room, while I had been delayed by calling at the barber's and the haberdasher's to buy my gloves. And so instead of dancing the mazurka with her, I danced it with a German girl I had once had a crush on. But I am afraid I was very neglectful of her that evening; I did not talk to her or look at her, for I had eyes for no one but a tall, slender girl in a white dress with a pink sash, with radiant, flushed, dimpled cheeks and soft, gentle eyes. I was not the only one; everyone looked at her and admired her, even the women, though she outshone them all. It was impossible not to admire her.

"Formally I was not her partner for the mazurka, but as a matter of fact I did dance it with her—at least most of it. Without the least embarrassment she danced straight to me down the length of the whole room, and when I leapt up to meet her without waiting for the invitation, she smiled to thank me for guessing what she wanted. When we had been led up to her and she had not guessed my nature, she had given a little shrug of her thin shoulders as she held out her hand to another, turning upon me a little smile of regret and consolation.

"When the figures of the mazurka changed into a waltz, I waltzed with her for a long time, and she smiled breathlessly and murmured '*encore*'. And I waltzed on and on with her, quite unaware of my own body, as if it were made of air."

"Unaware of it? I'm sure you must have been very much aware of it as you put your arm about her waist—aware of not only *your* body, but of hers as well," said one of the guests.

Ivan Vasilyevich suddenly turned crimson and almost shouted:

"That may apply to you, modern youth—all you think of is the body. In our day things were different. The more deeply I loved a girl, the more incorporeal she seemed to me. Today you are aware of legs, ankles, and other things; you disrobe the ladies with whom you are in love, but for me, as Alphonse Karr has said—and a very good writer he was—the object of my love was always clad in bronze raiment. Far from exposing, we tried to hide nakedness, as did the good son of Noah. But you cannot understand this."

"Pay no attention to him. Go on with your story," said another of the listeners.

"Well, I danced mostly with her and did not notice the passage of time. The musicians were so exhausted—you know how it always is at the end of a ball—that they kept playing the mazurka; mamás and papás were rising from the card-tables in the drawing-room in anticipation of supper; footmen were rushing about. It was going on for three o'clock. We had to take advantage of the few minutes left us. I invited her once more, and for the hundredth time we passed down the length of the room.

"Will I be your partner for the quadrille after supper?' I asked her as I took her back to her place.

"Oh, yes, if they do not take me home,' she said with a smile.

"I won't let them,' I said.

"Give me my fan,' she said.

"I am sorry to give it back to you,' I said as I handed her her cheap white fan.

"Here, to keep you from being sorry,' she said, plucking a feather out of the fan and giving it to me.

"I took the feather, unable to express my rapture and gratitude except with a glance. I was not only gay and content—I was happy, I was blissful, I was benevolent, I was no longer myself, but some creature not of this earth, who knew no evil and could do nothing but good.

"I tucked the feather in my glove and stood riveted to the spot, unable to move away from her.

"Look, they are asking papá to dance,' she said, indicating a tall, stately man who was her father, a colonel, in silver epaulettes, standing in the doorway with the hostess and some other women.

"‘Varenka, come here,’ called the hostess in the diamond tiara.

"‘Varenka made for the door and I followed her.

"‘Do talk your father into dancing with you, *ma chère*. Please do, Pyotr Vladislavich,’ said the hostess to the colonel.

"Varenka’s father was a tall, handsome, stately, and well-preserved old man. He had a ruddy face with a white moustache curled *à la* Nicholas I, white side whiskers that met his moustache, hair combed forward over his temples, and the same smile as his daughter’s lighting up his eyes and lips. He was very well built, with a broad chest swelling out in military style and with a modest display of decorations on it, with strong shoulders and long, fine legs. He was an officer of the old type with a military bearing of the Nicholas school.

"As we came up to the door the colonel was protesting that he had forgotten how to dance, but nevertheless he smiled, reached for his sword, drew it out of its scabbard, handed it to a young man eager to offer his services, and, drawing a suède glove onto his right hand (‘Everything according to rule,’ he said with a smile), he took his daughter’s hand and struck a pose in a quarter turn, waiting for the proper measure to begin.

"As soon as the mazurka phrase was introduced he stamped one foot energetically and swung out with the other, and then his tall heavy figure sailed round the ball-room. He kept striking one foot against the other, now slowly and gracefully, now quickly and energetically. The willowy form of Varenka floated beside him. Imperceptibly and always just in time, she kept lengthening or shortening the step of the little white satin feet to fit his.

"All the guests stood watching the couple’s every movement. The feeling I experienced was less admiration than a sort of deep ecstasy. I was especially touched by the sight of the colonel’s boots. They were good calfskin boots, but they were heelless and had blunt toes instead of fashionable pointed ones. Obviously they had been made by the battalion cobbler. ‘He wears ordinary boots instead of fashionable ones so that he can dress his beloved daughter and take her

into society,' I thought to myself, and that is why I was particularly touched by his blunt-toed boots. Anyone could see he had once danced beautifully, but now he was heavy and his legs were not flexible enough to make all the quick and pretty turns he attempted. But he went twice round the room very well, and everybody applauded when he quickly spread out his feet, then snapped them together again and fell, albeit rather heavily, on one knee. And she smiled as she freed her caught skirt and floated gracefully round him. When he had struggled back to his feet, he touchingly put his hands over his daughter's ears and kissed her on the forehead, then led her over to me, who he thought had been her dancing partner. I told him I was not.

"It doesn't matter; you dance with her,' he said, smiling warmly as he slipped his sword back into the scabbard.

"Just as the first drop poured out of a bottle brings a whole stream in its wake, so my love for Varenka released all the love in my soul. I embraced the whole world with love. I loved the hostess with her diamond tiara, and her husband, and her guests, and her footmen, and even the wretched Anisimov, who was clearly angry with me. As for her father with his blunt-toed boots and a smile so much like hers—I felt a rapturous affection for him.

"The mazurka came to an end and our hosts invited us to the supper table. But Colonel B. declined, saying that he must be up early in the morning. I was afraid he would take Varenka with him, but she remained behind with her mother.

"After supper I danced the promised quadrille with her. And while it had seemed that my happiness could not be greater, it went on growing and growing. We said nothing of love; I did not ask her, nor even myself, whether she loved me. It was sufficient that I loved her. The only thing I feared was that something might spoil my happiness.

"When I got home, undressed myself and thought of going to bed, I realized that sleep was out of the question. I held in my hand the feather from her fan and one of her gloves, which she had given to me when I put her and her mother into their carriage. As I gazed at these keepsakes I saw her again at the moment when, choosing one of two partners, she had guessed my nature and said in a sweet

voice, "*Too proud? Is that it?*" then joyfully held out her hand to me; or when, sipping champagne at the supper table, she had gazed at me over her glass with loving eyes. But I saw her best as she danced with her father, floating gracefully beside him, looking at the admiring spectators with joy and pride for his sake as well as her own. And involuntarily the two of them became merged in my mind and enveloped in one deep and tender feeling.

"At that time my late brother and I lived alone. My brother had no use for society and never went to balls. He was getting ready to take his examinations for a master's degree and was leading the most exemplary of lives. He was asleep. I felt sorry for him as I looked at his head buried in the pillow, half covered by the blanket—sorry because he did not know and did not share the happiness which was mine. Petrusha, our serf valet, met me with a candle and would have helped me undress, but I dismissed him. I was touched by the sight of the man's sleepy face and dishevelled hair. Trying to make no noise, I tiptoed to my own room and sat down on the bed. I was too happy. I could not sleep. I found it hot in the room, and so without taking off my uniform I went quietly out into the hall, put on my greatcoat, opened the entrance door, and went out.

"It had been almost five o'clock when I left the ball; about two hours had passed since, so that it was already light when I went out. It was typical Shrovetide weather—misty, with wet snow melting on the roads and water dripping from all the roofs. At that time the B.'s lived on the outskirts of town, at the edge of an open field with a girls' school at one end and a space used for promenading at the other. I went down our quiet little by-street and came out upon the main street, where I met passers-by and carters with timber loaded on sledges whose runners cut through the snow to the very pavement. And everything—the horses bobbing their heads rhythmically under their lacquered yokes, and the carters with bast matting on their shoulders plodding in their enormous boots through the slush beside their sledges, and the houses on either side of the street standing tall in the mist—everything seemed particularly dear and significant.

"When I reached the field where their house stood I saw

something big and black at the promenade end of it, and I heard the sounds of a fife and drum. My heart had been singing all this time, and occasionally the strains of the mazurka had come to my mind. But this was different music, harsh and sinister.

"What could it be?" I wondered, and made my way in the direction of the sounds, down the slippery waggon road that cut across the field. When I had gone about a hundred paces I began to distinguish in the mist a crowd of people. They were evidently soldiers. 'Drilling,' I thought, and continued on my way in the company of a blacksmith in an oil-stained apron and jacket who was carrying a large bundle. A double row of soldiers in black coats were standing facing each other motionless, their guns at their sides. Behind them stood a fifer and a drummer-boy who kept playing that shrill tune over and over.

"What are they doing?" I asked the blacksmith who was standing next to me.

"Driving a Tatar down the line for having tried to run away,' replied the blacksmith brusquely, glaring at the far end of the double row.

"I looked in the same direction and saw something horrible coming towards me between the rows. It was a man bare to the waist and tied to a horizontal gun held at either end by a soldier. Beside him walked a tall officer in a great-coat and forage cap whose figure seemed familiar to me. The prisoner, his whole body twitching, his feet squashing through the melting snow, advanced through the blows raining down on him from either side, now cringing back, at which the soldiers holding the gun would pull him forward, now lunging forward, at which the soldiers would jerk him back to keep him from falling. And next to him, walking firmly, never lagging behind, came the tall officer. It was her father, with his ruddy face and white moustache and side whiskers.

"At every blow the prisoner turned his pain-distorted face to the side from which the blow had come, as if in surprise, and kept repeating something over and over through bared white teeth. I could not make out the words until he came closer to me. He was sobbing rather than speaking them. 'Have mercy, brother; have mercy, brother.' But the

brothers had no mercy, and when the procession was directly opposite me I saw one of the soldiers step resolutely forward and bring his lash down so hard on the Tatar's back that it whistled through the air. The Tatar fell forward, but the soldiers jerked him up, and then another blow fell from the opposite side and again from this, and again from that... The colonel marched beside him, now glancing down at his feet, now up at the prisoner, drawing in deep breaths of air, blowing out his cheeks, slowly letting the air out between pursed lips. When the procession passed the spot where I was standing I got a glimpse of the prisoner's back through the row of soldiers. It was something indescribable: striped, wet, crimson, outlandish. I could not believe it was part of a human body.

"'God in heaven!' murmured the blacksmith standing next to me.

"The procession moved on. The blows kept falling from both sides on the cringing, floundering creature, the drum kept beating, the fife shrilling, and the tall, stately colonel walking firmly beside the prisoner. Suddenly the colonel stopped and went quickly over to one of the soldiers.

"'Missed? I'll show you!' I heard him say in a wrathful voice. 'Here, take this! And this!' And I saw his strong hand in its suède glove strike the small weak soldier in the face because the man's lash had not come down hard enough on the crimson back of the Tatar.

"'Bring fresh whips!' shouted the colonel. As he spoke he turned round and caught sight of me. Pretending not to recognize me, he gave a vicious, threatening scowl and turned quickly away. I felt so ashamed that I did not know where to turn my eyes, as if I had been caught doing something disgraceful. With hanging head I hurried home. All the way I kept hearing the rolling of the drum, the shrilling of the fife, the words, 'Have mercy, brothers,' and the wrathful, self-confident voice of the colonel shouting, 'Here, take this! And this!' And the aching of my heart was so intense as to be almost physical, making me feel nauseated, so that I had to stop several times. I felt I must throw up all the horror that this sight had filled me with. I do not remember how I reached home and got into bed, but the moment I began to doze off I saw and heard every-

thing all over again. I jumped up.

"‘There must be something he knows that I do not know,’ I said to myself, thinking of the colonel. ‘If I knew what he knows, I would understand, and what I saw would not cause me such anguish.’ But rack my brains as I might, I could not understand what it was the colonel knew, and I could not fall asleep until evening, and then only after having gone to see a friend and drinking myself into forgetfulness.

"Do you suppose I concluded that what I had seen was bad? Nothing of the sort. ‘If what I saw was done with such assurance and was accepted by everyone as being necessary, it means they know something I do not know,’ was the conclusion I came to, and I tried to find out what it was. But I never did. And not having found out, I could not enter military service, as it had been my intention to do, and not only military service, but any service at all, and so I turned out to be the good-for-nothing, that you see."

"We know very well what a ‘good-for-nothing’ you turned out to be," said one of the guests. "It would be more to the point to say how many people would have turned out to be good-for-nothing had it not been for you."

"Now that’s a foolish thing to say," said Ivan Vasilyevich with real vexation.

"Well, and what about your love?" we asked.

"My love? From that day on my love languished. Whenever we went out walking and she smiled that pensive smile of hers, I could not help recalling the colonel out in the field, and this made me feel uncomfortable and unhappy, and I gradually stopped going to see her. My love petered out.

"So that is what sometimes happens, and it is incidents like this that change and give direction to a man’s whole life. And you talk about environment," he said.

LEONID ANDREYEV

(1871–1919)

"There are people who excite and disturb your peace of mind. Such a person was Leonid Andreyev," wrote a contemporary about this author, who was extremely popular in Russia at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Maxim Gorky, one of Andreyev's closest friends, subscribed to these words, adding: "Wonderfully well said."

The work of Leonid Andreyev stirred up and excited the minds of his contemporaries, his fame overshadowing that of authors whose writings were more mature and profound. The thing is that in his stories he touched upon the painful issues of the day. He seemed to have an acute presentiment that the coming 20th century would be an age of unparalleled complexity and harshness.

Leonid Andreyev's first book of short stories was brought out in 1901 by the "Znanie" publishing house which, directed by Maxim Gorky, mustered all the progressive minds in Russia's society. The author sent a copy of his book to Lev Tolstoy, who said of it: "Before receipt of the book, I had already read most of the stories, many of which I liked very much." Practically every new story of Leonid Andreyev's made an event in the literary and social life of Russia: there was "Red Laughter" (1904), an uncompromising rejection of war, "The Tale of Seven Hanged Men" (1908), a passionate protest against the death sentence, "King-Famine" (1908), a drama, justifying the mutiny of the starving, and the story "Governor" (1905) in which he put forth the idea that the autocracy would inevitably pay for the crimes it had perpetrated against the people.

The author himself was in the very thick of the revolutionary situation developing turbulently in Russia. In 1905, he was arrested for

helping the Russian Social-Democrats. However, the defeat of the first Russian revolution and the following years of grim reaction had a ruinous effect on the development of his talent. Because he was not a consistent fighter, and because he did not have a clearly defined political platform, he lost his bearings. In his story "Darkness" (1907) he wrote: "If we cannot light up the darkness with our small lamp, let us put out all the lights and let all of us crawl into the darkness." This morbid appeal evoked sharp criticism from the progressive strata of society. Vorovsky, a Marxist critic, wrote: "Leonid Andreyev's story puts a very abrupt end to the period of hopes and enthusiasms. He does not only affirm the triumph of darkness, he goes further than that and finds an apology for this darkness. True, it is not the political darkness which the intellectuals have never reconciled themselves to. He seeks help from Dostoyevsky and reconstructs the idealised darkness of the insulted and humiliated, mistakenly thinking that this darkness is an antipode and not the reverse side of that hateful political darkness."

The story "Grand Slam" was written at the time of Andreyev's literary efflorescence. After reading it, Gorky said: "A new talent is emerging... The story is very well written. There is one detail which shows the author's ability most tellingly: he wanted to juxtapose life and death, and he did it very subtly, with a single brush stroke." The merits of the story were also noted by Lev Tolstoy. Gorky wrote to Andreyev: "I spoke about you with Tolstoy... He had high praise for your 'Once Upon a Time', 'Grand Slam', 'At the Window' and 'About Sergei Petrovich'... He had many words of approval for the purity of your language and your powerful portrayals..."

GRAND SLAM*

They played vint** three times a week, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Sunday was a very good day to play, but it had to be kept free for guests, the theatre, and such incidental things, and so it was thought the duller day of the week. They were always partnered as follows: fat, hot-tempered Maslennikov played with Yakov Ivanovich, and Evpraxia Vassilyevna with her morose brother Prokopy Vassilyevich. This was a partnership of long standing, established almost six years ago on the insistence of Evpraxia Vassilyevna. The thing was that the game lacked excitement when she and her brother played against each other, for in that case if one won the other lost, and in the final count neither was the winner. To be sure they played for very low stakes and both Evpraxia Vassilyevna and her brother were people of means, but she simply could not see the pleasure of playing for the sake of playing, and was overjoyed when she won. She kept her winnings apart in a money-box, and this small money was much more important and precious to her than those large banknotes which she had to hand out to her housekeeper for household expenses and with which she paid the rent of her high-costing flat. They played at Prokopy Vassilyevich's as there was just himself and his sister living in that huge flat, where there also existed a big white cat who was always asleep in an easy chair, and so they were assured the quiet which was so essential for the game. Evpraxia Vassilyevna's brother was a widower; he lost his wife in the second year of marriage and for two whole months after that he had to undergo treatment in a mental hospital. Evpraxia Vassilyevna herself had never married, al-

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1985

** *Vint*—an old Russian variety of whist.—Tr.

though once upon a time she did have a love affair with a university student. No one knew, and she herself seemed to have forgotten, why the marriage did not come off, but every year, when the usual appeal for aid to needy students was published, she always sent a neatly folded hundred-ruble note to the Committee "from an anonymous friend". She was the youngest of the four players: forty-three was her age.

When they first started playing with fixed partners Maslennikov, the oldest of the four, was highly displeased. It infuriated him that he would always have Yakov Ivanovich for a partner, and in other words would have to give up his dream of a grand slam in no trumps. And altogether they were an ill-assorted pair. Yakov Ivanovich was a strict and taciturn little old man, very slight and thin, who summer and winter wore a padded frock-coat. He always arrived at eight o'clock sharp, never a minute late or early, and at once picked up the chalk with his slender fingers on one of which he wore a rather loose ring with a large diamond. For Maslennikov, however, the most hateful thing about his partner was that he never played more than four, even when he had a big and sure game in his own hand. There was one time when he led a deuce to begin with, then continued with a three, a four, and so on all the way to the ace, taking all the thirteen tricks. Maslennikov threw his cards down on the table in a rage; unperturbed, his partner gathered the cards together and wrote down the score—what was due if they had played four in the suit.

"But why didn't you play a grand slam?" screamed Nikolai Dmitrievich (that was Maslennikov's name and patronymic).

"I never play more than four," the little old man replied dryly, and added didactically: "One never knows what might happen."

Maslennikov had to give up trying. He himself always overbid and since he was unlucky in cards he lost the game more often than not, but did not despair and hoped to win everything back next time. Little by little they adapted themselves to each other's style and left it at that. Nikolai Dmitrievich took chances, while Yakov Ivanovich calmly recorded the damage and next time bid his invariable four.

And so they played, summer and winter, spring and autumn. The senile world meekly bore the heavy brunt of its endless existence, now turning red from blood, now dissolving in tears and resounding as it continued on its journey through space with the moans of the sick, the hungry and the wronged. Faint echoes of this alarming and alien life were brought in by Nikolai Dmitrievich. Sometimes he came late, arriving when everyone was already seated at the table, with the cards spread out in a pink fan on its green baize top.

Nikolai Dmitrievich, ruddy-faced and smelling of fresh air, hastily took his seat opposite Yakov Ivanovich, made his excuses for being late, and said:

"There are so many people strolling up and down the boulevard. And they come and come..."

Being the hostess, Evpraxia Vassilyevna felt obliged not to notice the foibles of her guests. And so she alone responded to Nikolai Dmitrievich's remark, while Yakov Ivanovich silently and sternly got the chalk ready, and Propkopy Vassilyevich gave orders about the tea.

"Yes, I expect so, the weather is fine. Shall we begin?"

And they began. The high-ceilinged room in which all sounds were absorbed by the overstuffed furniture, draperies and thick carpet, became completely silent. The maid walked noiselessly on the thick-pile carpet as she set down the glasses of strong tea, and the silence was hardly disrupted by the rustling of her starched skirt, the squeal of the chalk, and the sighs heaved by Nikolai Dmitrievich when he went down too many. Unlike the others he always had very weak tea, and a small table was set at his elbow because he liked to drink his tea out of the saucer and have some toffees to go with it.

In the winter Nikolai Dmitrievich informed the players:

"It was ten degrees below zero at noon, and must be all of twenty now."

And in the summer he said:

"I saw a whole crowd going to the woods. With baskets."

Evpraxia Vassilyevna politely glanced at the sky—in the summer they played on the terrace—and although the sky was clear and the tops of the pines glinted gold, remarked:

"Hope it doesn't rain."

Yakov Ivanovich, the little old man, sternly fanned out the deck, drew the deuce of hearts and mentally called Nikolai Dmitrievich a light-minded and incorrigible person.

At one time Maslennikov worried his partners badly. When he came he always said something or other about Dreyfus. Making a sorrowful mien he informed them: "Things look bad for our Dreyfus." Or else he laughed and told them joyfully that the unfair sentence was probably going to be repealed. And then he started bringing newspapers and reading bits aloud always about that same Dreyfus.

"We've already read it," Yakov Ivanovich told him dryly, but Maslennikov ignored the remark and read out the passages he thought of interest and importance. By doing this he once got the others into an argument, almost a quarrel, because Evpraxia Vassilyevna refused to recognise legal court procedure and demanded that Dreyfus should be released at once, while Yakov Ivanovich and her brother insisted that certain formalities had to be observed first and only after that could Dreyfus be released. The first to collect himself was Yakov Ivanovich who, pointing at the table, asked:

"Isn't it about time we began?"

And they got down to the game, and thereafter, whenever Nikolai Dmitrievich talked about Dreyfus, they responded with a stony silence.

And they played like that summer and winter, spring and autumn. There were occasional happenings to remember, comic ones mostly. For instance, at moments something seemed to come over Prokopy Vassilyevich, he forgot how the bidding went and was one light when the five he was playing was an easy win. Nikolai Dmitrievich laughed heartily and made much of the lapse, while little old Yakov Ivanovich smiled and said:

"If you'd played four you would have made it."

They became especially excited when Evpraxia Vassilyevna bid a big game. She blushed in confusion, too overcome to decide which card to lead and looked imploringly at her morose brother, while the other two players, in chivalrous sympathy with her feminine helplessness, heartened her with kindly smiles and waited patiently for her to make up her mind. On the whole, however, they took the game very

seriously. For them cards had long ceased to be inanimate things, and each suit and each separate card in a suit was strictly individualised and lived a life of its own. They had their favourite suits and suits they disliked, some brought them good and others bad luck. The cards came in an infinite variety of combinations; this variety defied analysis and obeyed no laws, but at the same time there was a logic in it. And in that logic was contained the peculiar life of the cards and the peculiar life of the people playing with them. The players wanted the cards to fall in with their wishes, but the cards did what they liked, as if they had a will of their own, their own tastes, sympathies and whims. For instance, hearts came to Yakov Ivanovich with uncanny frequency, while Evpraxia Vassilyevna always got a lot of spades, although she disliked them very much. Sometimes the cards became capricious and then Yakov Ivanovich got more spades than he wanted, while Evpraxia Vassilyevna was dealt heart after heart and, forgetting caution in her delight, bid a big game and went down. Sometimes, too, the cards seemed to have a good laugh at the expense of the players. Nikolai Dmitrievich was dealt cards of all the four suits in equal number, but none of the suits developed into anything solid and the cards were like hotel guests who came and went, indifferent to the place where they had been obliged to stay for a few days. Or else, for days in a row he got nothing but deuces and threes, and what is more they stared him in the face with a look of downright impudence. Nikolai Dmitrievich was convinced that he could not make a grand slam because the cards knew how badly he wanted it and did not come to him on purpose, to spite him. And so he feigned complete indifference to the promise of a big game in his hand and tried not to look at his draw for as long as possible. Only very rarely did he manage to outwit the cards; usually, they seemed to see through his ruse and when he turned them face up there'd be three sixes laughing at him and perhaps a ruefully smiling King of Spades whom they had dragged in to keep them company.

Evpraxia Vassilyevna was the least intrigued by the mysterious inner life of the cards, and Yakov Ivanovich had long developed a strictly philosophical view and was immune to disappointment and shock, having a sure weapon against

fate in his bid of four. But Nikolai Dmitrievich simply could not reconcile himself to the cards' whimsicality, their mockery and inconstancy. When he went to bed he thought of the grand slam in no trumps which he would play one day, and it seemed such a simple, perfectly possible thing. He'd be dealt an ace, then a king, then another ace... But when, full of hope, he sat down to play, the cursed sixes again grinned at him, showing their wide white teeth. There was something fateful and malicious in this, he felt, and little by little his wish to make a grand slam in no trumps became his strongest ambition and fondest dream.

Other happenings also took place, apart from the game. Evpraxia Vassilyevna's big white cat died of old age and with the permission of the houseowner was buried in the garden under a lime tree. And then Nikolai Dmitrievich disappeared for two whole weeks, and his partners did not know what to think or do because three-handed vint made havoc of all their set ways and was not enjoyable at all. The cards themselves seemed to feel as the players did and came in the oddest combinations. When Nikolai Dmitrievich reappeared, everyone noticed that his usually ruddy cheeks, which made such a contrast to his grey fluffy hair, had lost colour somewhat, and his whole figure had shrunk and become shorter. He told them that his eldest son had been arrested for something and taken to St. Petersburg. His partners were amazed, because they did not know that Maslennikov had a son; he may have told them once, but they had quite forgotten. After that he missed a game again, and most unfortunately this was on a Saturday when they could play longer than on the other days. And once again everyone was surprised to learn that Maslennikov had long been suffering from a weak heart and that on Saturday he had a seizure. But then everything went back to normal, and the game became even more serious and interesting because Nikolai Dmitrievich did not indulge in so much chat about extraneous matters as before. As before, save for the rustling of the maid's starched skirts, the room was perfectly quiet as the cards slid noiselessly from the hands of the players and lived their own mysterious and mute life, quite apart from the life of the players. As before, they had no love for Nikolai Dmitrievich and sometimes were spitefully

mocking, and he sensed something fateful in their attitude.

But then on Thursday, November 26, a curious change took place. The very first deal gave Nikolai Dmitrievich the top honours in a suit and he made not the five he had bid but a small slam, not called only because Yakov Ivanovich refused to show the ace he had. After that, Nikolai Dmitrievich had a run of sixes for a time, but before long he started getting full suits, and they came in strict order as if all of them wanted to see how Nikolai Dmitrievich would rejoice. He made one game after another, and everyone was amazed, even the imperturbable Yakov Ivanovich. Nikolai Dmitrievich's excitement, which caused his plump, dimpled fingers to sweat and drop the cards, communicated itself to the others.

"What a run of luck you're having tonight," Prokopy Vassilyevich remarked morosely. There was nothing he feared so much as too good a fortune, because misfortune as great was bound to come in its wake. Evpraxia Vassilyevna was glad that Nikolai Dmitrievich was getting good cards at last and after what her brother said, she knocked on wood three times to ward off the evil eye and said:

"Touch wood, touch wood, touch wood. It's nothing to make a song and dance about. He's getting good cards, that's all, and the more he gets of them the better."

At this, the cards seemed to hesitate for a moment, several deuces turned up with a shy look, and then with redoubled speed, came an avalanche of aces, kings and queens. Nikolai Dmitrievich picked up his cards and bid with nervous haste, and already twice he bungled his deal and the hand had to be re-dealt. He made all the games he bid, even though Yakov Ivanovich kept quiet about his aces, and his amazement turned to distrust in this sudden change of fortune, and he resolved never to bid more than four. An angry flush suffused Nikolai Dmitrievich's face, he panted for breath and fumed at his partner. He played without thinking now, and bravely bid a big game, confident that he would find exactly what he needed in the draw.

And now, as he looked at the hand dealt him by the morose Prokopy Vassilyevich, his heart began to hammer, only to sink at once; he felt so dizzy that he swayed in his seat: he had twelve tricks in his hands—clubs and hearts

from the ace down to the ten, and the diamond ace and king. If the draw had the ace of spades he'd have a grand slam in no trumps.

"Two no trumps," he said barely able to control his voice.

"Three spades," bid Evpraxia Vassilyevna who was also terribly excited because she was holding almost all the spades, from the king down.

"Four hearts," Yakov Ivanovich responded dryly.

Nikolai Dmitrievich bid a small slam straightaway, but Evpraxia Vassilyevna was too agitated to surrender the game to him and called a grand slam in spades, well knowing that she could not make it. Nikolai Dmitrievich paused to think for a moment and then, with a certain solemnity behind which lurked fear, pronounced slowly:

"Grand slam in no trumps."

Nikolai Dmitrievich was going to play a grand slam in no trumps! Everyone was astounded, and Prokopy Vassilyevich even grunted: "Oho! "

Nikolai Dmitrievich reached for the draw, but he swayed and overturned the candle. Evpraxia Vassilyevna caught it, and for a second Nikolai Dmitrievich sat motionless and erect, his cards laid down on the table before him, and then he threw up his hands and slowly toppled to the left. In falling, he upset the small table at his elbow on which stood the saucer with his tea in it, and crushed one of its slender legs with his body.

When the doctor came he stated that Nikolai Dmitrievich had died from paralysis of the heart, and to comfort the living said a few words to them about the painlessness of such death. Nikolai Dmitrievich was carried to the couch in this very room where they had been playing, and lying there, covered with a sheet, he looked huge and frightening. One of his feet, the toe turned in, had remained uncovered and it did not seem to belong to him, but to someone else. A toffee paper had got stuck to the sole of his shoe which in the instep was black and perfectly new. The card table had not been taken away yet; the hands of the other three players had simply been dropped face down, but Nikolai Dmitrievich's cards lay in a neat, slender little deck, the way he had put them down.

Yakov Ivanovich paced the room in small, shaky steps,

and tried not to look at the corpse and not to step off the carpet on to the polished hardwood floor in which his high heels made a sharp, clicking sound. After passing the card table several times he stopped, gingerly picked up Nikolai Dmitrievich's cards, looked at them and put them back in the same neat little deck. Then he looked at the draw: the ace of spades, which Nikolai Dmitrievich needed for his grand slam, was there. Yakov Ivanovich walked up and down the room a few more times, then went into the adjoining room, buttoned up his padded frock-coat properly, and burst into tears of pity for Nikolai Dmitrievich. Closing his eyes he tried to picture his partner's face when he won a game and laughed. He felt especially sorry for Nikolai Dmitrievich when he remembered how light-minded he was and how much he wanted to win a grand slam in no trumps. The whole of that evening passed in review before his mind's eye, beginning with the five diamonds made by the deceased and ending with that steady run of good cards in which he had sensed something sinister. And then Nikolai Dmitrievich died, he died when he could have, at last, made a grand slam.

But one thought, terrible in its simplicity, sent a shudder through Yakov Ivanovich's slight frame and made him leap to his feet from the armchair he was sitting in. Glancing warily about him, as if the thought had not come to him of its own accord but had been whispered into his ear by someone, he said in a loud voice:

"He'll never know now that there was that ace in the draw and that he had a sure grand slam! Never! "

And it seemed to Yakov Ivanovich that until then he had not really understood what death was. He understood it now, and what he saw so clearly was too senseless, awful and irreparable. He would never know! Even if Yakov Ivanovich shouted it into his very ear, even if he wept and showed him his cards, Nikolai Dmitrievich would not hear and would never know, because there was no such person as Nikolai Dmitrievich in the world any more. If he could have made just one small movement, if he had been given just one more second of something that was life, Nikolai Dmitrievich would have seen the ace and known that he had a grand slam, but now everything was finished and he did

not know and never would know.

"Ne-ver," Yakov Ivanovich said slowly, clearly articulating the syllables to make certain that such a word did exist and had a meaning.

That word did exist and it had a meaning, but its meaning was so monstrous and bitter that Yakov Ivanovich subsided into the armchair again and wept helplessly with pity for Nikolai Dmitrievich, who would never know now, with pity for himself and for everyone because that same frightening and senselessly cruel thing would happen to him and to everyone else. He wept and played Nikolai Dmitrievich's hand for him, taking one trick after the other until he had taken all thirteen, and thinking meanwhile how much he would have scored and how he would never know it. This was the first and last time that Yakov Ivanovich went back on his rule of playing no more than four, and in the name of friendship played a grand slam in no trumps.

"Oh, you're here, are you, Yakov Ivanovich?" said Evpraxia Vassilyevna coming into the room. She sank on to the chair beside him and burst into tears: "It's awful, it's awful! "

They looked at each other and wept in silence, aware that a corpse, cold, heavy and mute, was lying on the couch in the adjoining room.

"Have you sent word?" asked Yakov Ivanovich, blowing his nose loudly and furiously.

"Yes, my brother has gone with Annushka. But how will they ever find where he lived—we don't know the address, you see."

"Isn't it where he lived last year?" Yakov Ivanovich asked absently.

"No, he moved. Annushka tells me that once when he took a cab he told the man to go to Novinsky Boulevard somewhere."

"They'll find it through the police," Yakov Ivanovich reassured her. "I believe he had a wife, did he?"

Evpraxia Vassilyevna was looking at him reflectively and did not answer his question. He fancied that in her eyes he read the thought that had just crossed his own mind. He blew his nose once more, stuffed his handkerchief into a pocket of his padded frock-coat and, raising his eyebrows

inquiringly high above his reddened eyes, asked:

“And where will we find a fourth now, I wonder?”

But Evpraxia Vassilyevna did not hear him, busy with her own considerations as the hostess in this house. After a silence she asked him:

“And you, Yakov Ivanovich, are you still living at the same address?”

1899

Translated by Olga Shartse

ANTON CHEKHOV

(1860—1904)

Anton Chekhov was born into a merchant-class family. His father owned a grocery store in Taganrog, but he went bankrupt and, in 1876, moved to Moscow with his family. Anton, then a boy of sixteen, was set on finishing school and, as his father could no longer support him, lived by giving private lessons.

After school, he entered Moscow University, the Department of Medicine, and graduated in 1884. By that time his aged parents had become entirely dependent on him for their living, and he also had his brothers and sisters to support.

Chekhov began writing in the late 1870's. The magazines "Strekoza", "Budilnik," "Zritel", "Moskva" and others printed a multitude of his humorous short stories, signed with various pen-names, and in 1884 Chekhov's first collection of stories came out under the title: "Tales of Melpomene".

Besides the numerous short stories, which brought him international fame, Chekhov wrote several plays, among them: "The Seagull" (1896), "Uncle Vanya" (1897), "Three Sisters" (1901) and "The Cherry Orchard" (1904), which are still being staged with invariable success by theatres everywhere in the world. As the plays came out, they were produced by the Moscow Art Theatre. Olga Knipper, a leading actress of this theatre, became Chekhov's wife.

Ivan Bunin, who was a very close friend of Chekhov, in his latter years wrote: "There has never been a writer like Chekhov. He made a journey to Sakhalin, wrote a book about it, worked during the famine and an epidemic of cholera, practised medicine, built schools, organised a library in Taganrog, saw to the erection of a monument to Peter the Great in his home town, all in the course of seven years, and that with his progressing mortal illness! "

*A STORY ABOUT LOVE**

For lunch on the second day there were delicious little pies, crayfish and mutton chops; while we were eating, Nikanor, the chef, came upstairs to ask what the guests would like to have for dinner. Nikanor was a man of medium height with a plump face and tiny eyes; he was clean-shaven but his upper lip somehow looked plucked, rather than shaved.

Alyokhin told us that Pelageya, the handsome parlour-maid, was in love with this Nikanor. Because he was a drunkard and had a vile temper she did not want to marry him but was willing to live with him just like that. Nikanor, however, was a very pious man and his religious convictions would not permit him to live with her in sin. He demanded that she should marry him, it was that or nothing, and when he was drunk he swore at her and even beat her up. When he was drunk, she hid from him in the upstairs rooms and sobbed, and then Alyokhin himself and his other servants stayed in the house to protect her if the need arose.

Our conversation turned to love.

"How does love happen?" asked Alyokhin. "Why did not Pelageya fall in love with some other man, better suited to her in character and looks, but went and fell in love with Nikanor of all people, that ugly mug—everyone here calls him an ugly mug. And since in love the all-important question of happiness is a very personal thing, the answers to all these questions remain unknown and the whole problem can be interpreted in any way one likes. Until now only one indisputable true thing has been said about love—that it is indeed a great mystery; as for the rest, everything that has ever been written and said about love only posed and never

answered questions, which have remained unsolved to this day. An explanation which seemed good for one case proved of no use for ten others, and the best thing, in my opinion, is to explain each case separately, without attempting to draw any generalisations. Each case should be treated individually, as the doctors say."

"Quite right," agreed Burkin.

"We, decent Russian people, have a weakness for questions that remain unanswered. Usually love is poeticized, embellished with roses and nightingales, but we, Russians, embellish our love with these fateful questions and, what's more, choose the least interesting ones. In Moscow, in my student days, I had a lady friend, a sweet woman who every time I took her in arms wondered how much I'd be giving her a month and remembered how much a pound of beef was. We, men, are as bad; when we're in love we keep asking ourselves: is it honest or dishonest, wise or foolish, what will this love lead to, and more to the same effect. I do not know whether it's good or bad, what I do know is that it's a nuisance, it's irritating and leaves us unsatisfied."

This sounded like a prelude to some story he wanted to tell us. People who live a solitary life always have something burdening their hearts which they would gladly share with others. In town, bachelors go to public baths and restaurants just to talk with someone, and sometimes they tell the most curious stories about themselves to bath attendants and waiters. In the country, they usually pour out their souls to their guests. Through the windows we saw grey skies and rain-sodden trees; in weather like that we could not go anywhere, and there was nothing else to do except to recount some experience of one's own or listen to someone else's story.

"I have been living in Sofyino and farming for a long time now," began Alyokhin. "Since I finished the university, in fact. By upbringing I'm a gentleman of leisure and by inclination I'm an armchair worker, but when I came here I found that the estate was badly in the red and, since my expensive education was partly to blame for my father's indebtedness, I resolved not to leave the place until I had paid off his debts. And so, with this resolve I got down to work, not without some aversion I must confess. The land

here yields little and to make it pay you've got to use serf or hired labour, which amounts to the same thing, or else toil like the peasants do, that is, go out into the fields yourself with your whole family. There is no middle course here. But at the time I did not go into all these fine points. I did not leave a single scrap of land alone, I rounded up all the men and women from the neighbouring villages and we worked like mad. I myself ploughed, sowed and mowed, and at the same time felt bored and grimaced fastidiously like a village cat whom hunger has driven to eating cucumbers in a kitchen garden; my whole body ached, and I slept on my feet. At first I believed that I could easily reconcile this life of manual labour with my civilized habits: all I need do, I thought, was maintain a certain outward decorum in life. I settled in in these best rooms upstairs and made it a rule to have coffee and liqueurs served me after lunch and dinner. Also, before I went to sleep, I always read the newspaper, *Vestnik Evropy*. But one day our priest, Father Ivan, came to call, and he drank up all my liqueurs at one go; my newspaper also went to the priest's daughters, because in the summer, especially in haymaking time, I was too tired to reach my bed and fell asleep in the barn, in a sleigh, or somewhere in a forest shack, so what reading could I do? Little by little I moved into the downstairs rooms, I now took my meals in the servants' kitchen, and all I had left of my former grandeur were all these servants who had served my father and whom I had not the heart to discharge.

In those very first years I was elected an honorary justice of the peace. Now and then I had to go to town to attend the sittings of the district court, and it was a very pleasant change. When you are cooped up here for two or three months, especially in winter, you start yearning for your black frock-coat. And at those district court sessions there were frock-coats and full-dress coats and tail coats galore, I was amidst lawyers, people who had received a good general education, so there was no dearth of conversationalists here. After sleeping in a sleigh, after eating in the servants' kitchen, it seemed such a luxury to be seated in an armchair wearing a clean shirt, thin shoes and a chain across your chest!

In town, people gave me a hospitable welcome and I re-

adily made new acquaintances. My most solid and pleasant acquaintance was with Luganovich, vice-chairman of the district court. Both of you know him—a most charming person. I met him during the hearing of the notorious arson case. The trial had gone on for two days, we were tired out. Luganovich took a look at me and said:

“D’you know what? You’re coming home with me for dinner.”

This was somewhat unexpected as I hardly knew Luganovich then, only in the official capacity, and had never been to his house. I only stopped at my hotel for a minute to change, and went on to his place. And here I had the opportunity to be presented to Anna Alexeyevna, Luganovich’s wife. She was very young at the time, not more than two and twenty, and about six months before then she had given birth to their first child. It’s past history now, and today I’d find it rather difficult to define what was so extraordinary in her, what was it I liked so much about her, but at that dinner everything was as clear as day to me; I saw a young, beautiful, kind, charming, well-bred woman, unlike anyone I had ever met before, and at once I sensed in her a being close to me in spirit, a being I already knew intimately, as if I had seen that face and those kind, intelligent eyes in my childhood, in the album that always lay on my mother’s chest of drawers.

Four Jews were convicted in that arson case, they were declared a gang, quite unfairly, I thought. During the dinner I was terribly agitated, my conscience tormented me, I don’t remember now what I said, only that Anna Alexeyevna kept shaking her head and asking her husband:

“But, Dmitry, how can such things be?”

Luganovich is a good soul, one of those simple-hearted men who firmly uphold the view that once a person has come up for trial he is guilty, and expressing doubt in the correctness of the verdict can only be done legally, on paper, and by no means at dinner or in private conversation.

“Now, you and I did not commit arson,” he spoke gently. “And so we aren’t tried, we are not put in prison, are we?”

Both of them the husband and the wife, pressed food and drink on me assiduously. From such small things as, for in-

stance, their making the coffee together as well as from the way they understood each other without having to spell everything out, I was able to conclude that all was well with them, and also that they were glad to have a guest. After dinner they played duets on the piano, then it grew dark and I went home. This was early in spring. The whole of that summer I was chained to Sofyino, I was too busy to give the town even a thought, but the memory of that fair-haired, slender woman remained with me all the time; I did not consciously think about her, it was more as if her light shadow lay on my soul.

Later in autumn, a play in aid of some benevolent society was given in town. When I entered the governor's box (I had been invited during the interval) and saw Anna Alekseyevna sitting next to the governor's wife, I was again smitten by the irresistible magic of her beauty and her dear, gentle eyes, and again I had the same sense of intimacy as before.

I sat beside her and afterwards we walked about in the foyer.

"You've grown thin," she said. "Were you ill?"

"Yes, I caught a chill in my shoulder and in rainy weather it won't let me sleep."

"You have a listless look. In the spring, when you came to dinner with us, you looked younger, brighter. You were excited and talked a lot, you were very attractive and, I confess, I even fell a little bit in love with you. I don't know why, but my thoughts often turned to you all this summer, and tonight, when I was getting dressed for the theatre, something told me that I should see you."

She laughed, and then said again: "But you do have a listless look tonight. It ages you."

The next day I had lunch at their house. After lunch, husband and wife had to go to their dacha to make the necessary arrangements for the winter, and I went with them. I returned to town with them, and at midnight had tea in the peace and quiet of their home, with the fire burning in the grate and the young mother slipping out all the time to see if her baby daughter was asleep. And after that, every time I came to town I made a point of visiting the Luganoviches. They became used to me, and I to them. Usually I

came in unannounced, as a member of the family.

“‘Who’s there?’ a lingering voice which sounded so beautiful to me would call from one of the rooms at the back of the house.

“‘It’s Pavel Konstantinovich,’ the parlourmaid or the nanny would reply.

“Anna Alexeyevna would come out to greet me and would invariably ask me with a worried look:

“‘Why did you stay away for such a long time? Had something happened?’

And every time her glance, the graceful, noble hand which she held out to me, her informal gown, her hairdo, voice, the sound of her footsteps, gave me the same impression of something new, extraordinary and important that was happening in my life. We had long talks, or else we sat in comfortable silence, thinking our own thoughts, and sometimes she played the piano for me. If neither of the Luganoviches was in, I stayed and waited, chatting with their nanny, playing with the baby, or lying on the couch in the study and reading the newspaper. When Anna Alexeyevna returned from her shopping, I met her in the hall, relieved her of her packages, and each time, I don’t know why, I felt like a small boy carrying her packages so lovingly, so triumphantly.

They say: if you haven’t enough worry, get a pet, you won’t be sorry. Well, the Luganoviches had no worries, and so they befriended me. If I did not come to town for a long time they thought that I was ill or that something had happened to me and worried terribly. It worried them that I, an educated man who knew several foreign languages, should live in the country, working round the clock to keep the wolf from the door instead of engaging in science or literature, and never had a bean in my pocket. They believed that I was suffering and that if I did talk, laugh and eat it was only to hide my sufferings; even in a gay moment when I felt fine I was conscious of them watching me anxiously. They were especially touching when things went really wrong, when I was driven against the wall by a creditor, or when I did not have the money to meet an urgent payment. Husband and wife would hold a whispered conversation near the window, and then he would come forward and say to me with a grave face:

"If you are in need of money just now, Pavel Konstantinovich, we beg you, my wife and I, not to stand on ceremony and accept a loan from us."

His ears would turn red from embarrassment. And sometimes, after whispering in the window with his wife, he would come close to me with his ears aflame and say:

"My wife and I insistently beg you to accept this little gift from us."

And he would give me a pair of cuff links, a cigarette case, or a table lamp, and in reciprocation I would send them poultry, flowers and butter from the country. I must say, in passing, that both of them were well-to-do people. At first I often had to borrow money and I was not too particular who I borrowed it from, but no power on earth could have made me take any from the Luganoviches. But that's only natural, of course.

I was miserable. Wherever I was—in the house, out in the fields, or in the threshing barn—I thought about her all the time, I tried to fathom the secret of that young, beautiful and intelligent woman who went and married an unattractive man, almost a dotard (he was over forty), and had children by him; I tried to fathom the secret of this unattractive, simple-hearted man, a good soul whose reasoning was so boringly sensible, who at the balls and dances kept with the staid older people, standing there—a spiritless, superfluous man wearing a meek, apathetic expression, much like a sheep brought there to be sold,—and yet who believed in his right to be happy and to father her children; all the time I kept trying to understand why it was he who met her first and not I, and why did such a terrible mistake have to happen in our life.

Every time I came to town and called I read in her eyes that she had been waiting for me, and once she herself admitted that since morning she'd had a peculiar sort of feeling which told her that I'd come. We had long talks, long silences, but we did not put our love into words, guarding the secret timorously and jealously. We were afraid of everything that could make us face this secret. I loved her tenderly and deeply, but I reasoned, I asked myself what our love would lead to if we ran short of strength to fight it? I could not conceive of this quiet, wistful love of mine suddenly

and rudely shattering the happily flowing life of her husband, her children, the entire household where I was so well liked and so implicitly trusted. Would it be honest? Would she come with me, and where? Where could I take her? It would be another matter if I had a beautiful, interesting life, if I were fighting for the liberation of my country or, say, if I was a famous scholar, an actor or a painter, but I was none of these things, you see, and so I would be simply taking her from one humdrum existence into another one as humdrum, or even worse. And how long would our happiness last? What would become of her if I fell ill, died, or if we simply fell out of love with each other?

Apparently she, too, reasoned along the same lines. She was thinking of her husband, their children, and her mother who loved her husband like a son. If she surrendered to her feeling, she'd have to lie or tell the truth, and in her position one was as frightening and embarrassing as the other. She, too, was tormented by the question: would her love make me happy, would it not complicate my life, which was already hard and fraught with all kinds of misfortunes? She believed that she was not young enough, that she was not industrious and energetic enough to start anew, and she often told her husband that I ought to marry a clever, worthy girl who'd make a good housewife and be a help to me, adding in the same breath that a girl like that could hardly be found in the whole of the town.

Meanwhile, the years rolled on. Anna Alexeyevna already had two children. When I called, the servants gave me a smiling welcome, the children shouted that uncle Pavel Konstantinovich had come and threw themselves on my neck; everyone was delighted. They did not know what was going on in my heart and thought that I, too, was delighted. Everyone believed me to be an honourable man. Everyone, the grown-ups and the children, felt that it was an honourable man who was walking about the room, and this lent a special charm to their treatment of me, as if in my presence their life was all the more immaculate and beautiful. Anna Alexeyevna and I went to the theatre sometimes, and always on foot; we sat in the stalls with our shoulders touching, I took the opera glasses from her hands without speaking and in that moment felt how close she was to me, that she was

mine, that we could not do without each other; absurdly, when we left the theatre, we said good-night and parted like strangers. There was already talk about us in town, but there was not a word of truth in all the awful things that were said.

In latter years Anna Alexeyevna started going off to stay with her mother or her sister more frequently than before; she already had spells of ill humour when her life appeared unfulfilled and ruined, and she did not want to see either her husband or her children. She was already taking treatment for her nerves.

But we said nothing, we still said nothing, and when others were present she treated me with a strange irritability: no matter what I said she disagreed with me, and if I was arguing some point she invariably sided with my opponent. If I dropped something she said frigidly: "Congratulations." If I forgot to take my opera glasses when we went to the theatre, she was bound to say: "I knew you'd forget something."

Fortunately or unfortunately, there is nothing in our life that does not end sooner or later. Luganovich was appointed chairman in one of our western gubernias, and so the time came for us to part. They had the furniture, the horses and their dacha to dispose of. I went with them to their dacha, and when we were walking away from it we kept glancing back for a last look at the garden and the green roof and everyone felt sad, and I realized that it was not the dacha alone we were saying goodbye to. It was decided that at the end of August we would see Anna Alexeyevna off to the Crimea, where she was going on her doctor's orders, and a little later Luganovich and the children would depart for that western gubernia of his.

A crowd of us came to see Anna Alexeyevna off. When she had already kissed her husband and her children goodbye, and only a moment remained before the train steamed off, I rushed in to her compartment with a small basket she had left behind. Also, I had to say goodbye to her. And there, in that compartment, our eyes met, I took her in my arms, she pressed her face to my chest, and cried. I kissed her face, her shoulders, her tear-wet hands—oh, how terribly miserable we were! —I told her I loved her and realized

with a piercing pain in my heart how needless, petty and deceptive were all those considerations that stood in the way of our love. I realized that when you loved someone, in your reasoning about your love you had to proceed from higher, more important considerations than happiness or misery, sin or virtue in their popular sense, or not reason at all.

I kissed her for the last time, pressed her hand, and we parted forever.

The train was already moving. I went into the adjacent compartment—it was unoccupied—and sat there and wept. At the first stop I got off and went home to Sofyino on foot.

While Alyokhin was telling us his story, the rain stopped and the sun came out. Burkin and Ivan Ivanovich went to the balcony from which there was a splendid view of the garden and the river which now gleamed in the sun like a mirror. They were thinking, as they admired the view, what a pity it was that the man with the kind, intelligent eyes who had told them his story so candidly was working his fingers to the bone on this huge estate instead of engaging in science or some other pursuits which would have made his life more pleasant; they were also thinking how sorrowful must have been the face of that young lady when he was saying goodbye to her in that train compartment and kissing her face and her shoulders. Both of them had seen her about town, and Burkin was actually acquainted with her and found her beautiful.

1898

Translated by Olga Shartse

ALEXEI REMIZOV

(1877–1957)

Alexei Remizov is one of the Russian writers whose work was divided by the October Revolution into two parts. Before emigrating in 1921, Remizov had published 37 books and was a leader of the symbolist movement, a writer with a virtuoso command of the Russian language in all its great wealth. The books that he wrote in emigration are but a feeble reflexion of what he had achieved in his homeland.

Remizov was born into a Moscow merchant-class family which had more or less recently risen from the peasantry. On entering the Natural Science Department of Moscow University's Physics and Mathematics Faculty, Remizov read history, jurisprudence, philosophy, biology and mathematics. In the 1890s, Russian students were active in the struggle against tsarism; Remizov did not stand apart from political events either, regarding himself as a Social-Democrat. In 1897, he was arrested at a student demonstration and, after a spell in prison, was banished under police surveillance to Penza province. "My feelings were raised to white heat, I suffered agonies all the time," Remizov recalled afterwards. "I counted every step and cherished every moment, but this pain was quite different, not like a pain for myself and mine, it was pain for the whole world". That pain for the whole world, a distinguishing feature of Russian literature, permeates all Remizov's best writings. His short novels "Emaliol" and "In

Captivity " cannot be understood without reference to Dostoyevsky, who underwent agonising years of penal servitude, or to the literary tradition of "Notes from a Dead House". Dostoyevsky apart, Gogol and Leskov also greatly influenced the development of Remizov's talent and his concern for the fate of the little man. The words of Marakulin, hero of Remizov's best-known short novel "Sisters in Christ" (1910), might have come from any of the writers mentioned above: "If people were to look closely at one another and notice one another, if all were given eyes, then only a heart of iron would put up with all the horror and bafflement of life. And, perhaps, there would be no need of an iron heart if people were to take notice of one another."

In 1921, unable to bear the hardships and privations in a famine-stricken country barely recovering from the wounds inflicted by the Civil War and the foreign intervention, Remizov and his wife went to Berlin and then to Paris. Life abroad proved tragically unbearable for Remizov; he could not find publishers for his very "Russian" works and he lived on the edge of starvation. In 1943 he lost his wife, his only mainstay and support in life. Totally blind and unable to write, Remizov died in extreme poverty. Natalia Kodryanskaya, who knew him well in the last years of his life, wrote: "He never forgot about Russia and his severance from it caused him acute and grievous suffering."

*THE SILVER SPOONS**

Chapter One

Pevtsov was discharged from prison three days ago. He rushed all round the city, imploring all the landladies to let him have a room so that he could wait until the settlement of his case. Nothing doing. He'd come to terms with them and shake hands on the deal, but as soon as it came to his passport—curtains! Get lost! Of course, he could have put up at a hotel. But a hotel is not a home. They show you the door with alacrity when you've only got coppers in your pocket. You don't get much of a ride on a five-kopeck piece!

Oh, these small towns, warm and stuffed full of cabbage pie when everything was going well and scary when disaster struck. You could die of starvation on the road under a fence, and no one would lift a finger.

Pevtsov decided to see a friend. Whatever happened, perhaps he might remember and it would be all right.

He found his friend at home.

They immediately sat down at the samovar.

Pevtsov found big changes at the Tyukhovs. The house had burned down and they had built a new one. Fyodor Petrovich had graduated at university, had put on weight, and his grandmother ruled him with a rod of iron.

The friends drank up samovar after samovar on the open balcony. The Tyukhovs had built a funny kind of balcony, they had made an area with a balustrade on the roof of the new house—that's the sort of terrace it was! They drank tea with gusto until they were sheening with perspiration.

Down below, turbid columns of dust swept shamelessly across the city and, dispersing, penetrated everywhere. With the result that grit got into their teeth and their noses

tickled and dust mingled with perspiration was smeared all over their faces and hands.

Sticking out his long, scrawny neck and feverishly darting his deep-sunken eyes from side to side, Pevtsov described in the minutest detail with repetitions, day by day, the ups and downs of his long spell in prison.

Prolonged silence had curbed his tongue, the words stuck somewhere in his throat and the vet essence of what he wanted to say hopped about in front of his nose, teasing him and constantly ducking out of his way.

Fyodor Petrovich kept nodding his enormous, balding head in token of approval.

"But they discharged me," continued Pevtsov, "on terms past all understanding. Our colonel, who was in charge of the case, is a crank to beat all cranks. I'd be brought for interrogation and he'd make his daughter play the piano in the next room. Or he'd start telling how he'd been to the theatre the evening before and what he'd seen. He'd start crying at the sensitive places. He'd weep a bit, then he'd call the orderly and I'd be taken back to prison. The last time, they brought me to the colonel early in the morning. Goodness knows what he didn't regale me with: he wined me and dined me. As evening fell, he said, 'D'you want,' says he, to come with me to the summer theatre?' 'I do,' say I, 'fancy asking!' So off we go. Masses of people at the theatre. 'We'll watch one act, and then off to prison with you!' said the colonel to me and he went to his place. And suddenly I found myself alone in a crowd of thousands, absolutely alone. I stood there dumbfounded, clutched at one idea, then at another; a host of plans came into my head, I didn't even want to escape any more! I had already escaped in my mind a long time ago, and I was standing there, I had come back. They had caught me—no, not yet, but they would do so any moment. The curtain came down, the act was over, the music started playing. The colonel came out. 'let's go,' says he, 'we'll have a stroll, and then we'll drop into the exhibition, we'll listen to the girls singing, and then off to prison with you!' We went for our stroll. The people stepped out of our way. They were watching us. The whole crowd was staring at us like one single eye. We walked right round the theatre and turned off into the exhibition. I be-

gan trembling and I was wobbly at the knees. We strolled round the exhibition. Some girls were singing. And as if through a kind of mist and sharp voices, I heard the voice of the colonel—the same phrases, these same words as when he had interrogated that morning! And the girls were singing away and the music was playing, of course. He interrogated me to the strains of singing and music. Suddenly, the colonel broke off on mid-word and seized me by the arm. ‘Go where you like,’ says he, ‘only as quickly as possible!’ I go into the crowd. I can see the governor coming. He’s asking the colonel something and pointing my way. But the colonel shakes his head, I’m not there any more. I’m going somewhere else. The girls are singing. Someone says, ‘You’re a spy’.”

“I understand. I understand. I understand everything!”

Calmly, dispassionately, the warm dust sailed along, obscuring the broad horizon, the yellow fields and the green forest.

Chapter Two

Everything would have been fine, living with the Tyukhovs, as in Christ’s bosom. Just one problem—Grandma Tyukhina ruled the roost.

There was no peace day or night from the old woman. She grumbled and grumbled all the time.

Nothing was right for her. Why was there a heat-wave, and why were there hardly any rains, and why did the flies buzz and bite so much, and why had a stranger without a passport moved into the house?

“His sort could even forge banknotes, the rascal,” grumbled the old woman.

If they sat down at table, the conversation was about one subject—the fire. It had happened a year previously and Grandma had been suffering from it ever since.

“Lord, the property, the property that went up in flames. The fire blazed up in the wing, Fedyusha heard it and came to me, and I was fast asleep. ‘Grandma’ he says, ‘Grandma, get up!’ He picks me up, an old woman, in his arms like a baby and carries me out. Fedyusha’s new boots, the new

ones he brought from Petersburg, his uniform and all my kerchiefs—it was just as if they'd been lapped up by the fire. Lord, the goods, the goods that went up in flames! ”

Fyodor Petrovich would puff away and eat as hungrily as a cat.

After dinner, tea was made. You had to keep your ears skinned now. Grandmother would be passing remarks all the time.

“The expenses have been enormous, they'll skin you alive, Fedyushka, those dear friends of yours. And the sugar's going quickly too.”

And Grandma would whine, grumble and moan until evening. There would be no peace until the old woman retired for a night's sleep.

Pevtsov would go outside, settle himself somewhere in the Tyukhovs' garden and wait until nightfall.

And night would sail up, shining, chirping and sighing as it does in the summertime.

A mist would rise. The din of the city would die away in a last rumble of activity.

Something quiet lived unseen in the shade of the dreaming leaves under the ripening apples, as if approaching autumn was already casting its first languid glances on earth.

The starry night flowed alluringly on, after embracing the day with its worries and its work and the evening with its drinking and hunger.

“You're a spy! ” someone would suddenly seem to say under cover of night.

“No, it's not true! ”

And a whole swarm of thoughts would assail his heart; prison came up again, all those days and all those nights in confinement, all the interrogations and all the eccentric colonel's attempts to persuade him.

“And if you were once on the verge of betraying?” Pevtsov began interrogating himself and answering his own questions. “No, never.” “And if you once thought of betraying?” “I thought... Once... They all betrayed me! I never betrayed anyone. But once... Yes, once I thought...”

“You're a spy.”

“No, it's not true.”

"To think and to do are the same thing. You're a spy."

Pevtsov would lower his eyes, rise timidly from the bench, leave the Tyukhovs' garden and return to the house without looking back.

He would knock for a long time and to no avail.

Finally, the sleepy old woman would come out, wearing the loose nightgown in which Fedyusha had carried her away from the fire. The old woman would open the door.

"Huh! Rascals, no peace from you in this world or the next," she would complain.

Pevtsov would tiptoe into the room, spread his coat on the floor and lie down on it, just to get some sleep.

Chapter Three

One beautiful day, everything in the household was topsy-turvy.

Grandma left. She was no longer in the house and nobody could be whined, grumbled or groaned at any more.

Real life began.

Tyukhov had visitors in the evenings. You could stay there till morning and no one would say a word. The visitors did indeed stay till morning and the drunken ones fell asleep in rows, wherever they happened to end up.

It was Grandmother's soft feather mattress and not someone's overcoat that was in use as a bed for the night. The vodka never ran out. Drink to your heart's content! Of all the eggs laid aside by Grandmother for winter only the shells remained and they weren't cleared away but they were thrown into a corner.

Apples also were picked and munched. They were used as snacks to go with the vodka.

After midday, a merry life began. They got up, drank tea, did not dine, but someone would arrive. And the fun started.

Pevtsov accepted things as they were.

The fuggy days drowned with their drunkenness and nausea and uninvited voice, all agonising interrogations. And there arose in his soul the vague image of another life, not the one à la Tyukhov that gave you splitting headaches.

If only they would settle his case, things would go differently after the verdict! That was how Pevtsov consoled himself.

And the new life, the other life, not à la Tyukhov, seemed already near.

However, things were turned topsy-turvy again and again.

The investigation was nearing its end. People were being interrogated to round the matter off. Whenever someone under interrogation answered evasively, the eccentric colonel would declare without the least embarrassment that he needs only summon Pevtsov and the problem would be solved forthwith. "Pevtsov will tell the whole truth".

Pevtsov rarely left the house. When he did, it was seldom without incident. A friend did not offer to shake hands or crossed the street to avoid meeting him.

"How much are you getting from the police?" asked one of the people summoned in connection with his case.

"Six rubles," replied Pevtsov without a second thought.

He would get those six rubles when he was banished. At present he was not receiving a kopek. Why had he told a lie? He himself didn't know. Had they really asked him about those six rubles?

Pevtsov tried explaining the matter to people here and there. It didn't help, and it made him even more confused. As he told his story, he muddled things up and lost his way. But a straight answer was needed: was he or was he not a spy, yes, or no, and nothing more.

And always, after a night's drinking, Pevtsov did not go to sleep, implacably interrogated himself, but in the most scathing language. And, finding no fault, he invented one, scraping it up from trifles, from nothingness, and put round his neck an enormous stone—a fault which man cannot forgive.

But even in the darkness of sleep, the voice hammered away at him:

"To think and to do are the same thing. You're a spy! "

In the meantime, a letter came from Grandma. She wrote to Fedyusha that he should take care of the house, look after the property and especially the silver bequeathed by his late father and he should keep an eye on that friend of his: anything could happen...

But Fedyusha had long since mortgaged the house. He needed the money for a wedding. Fedyusha had decided to get married. And this was the time for repairs.

One day, at dawn, carpenters began banging their hammers, and the house was filled with the hoarse gasping sounds of wood being planed.

The friends settled themselves on the wood shavings amid the fragrant sawdust. Everything had to be considered and prepared for the wedding.

Discussions of the event took up all the time.

The cook Nyusha was hired to look after the house. Nyusha was soon on friendly terms with the carpenters. The smoke simply billowed forth.

And so all hell was let loose all through the fast of the Dormition. Only after Dormition Day did Fedyusha leave for a suburban church to get married. Pevtsov also wanted to go as best man, but the governor refused permission.

Pevtsov was left alone in Tyukhov's house.

Except that there was no possibility of being left alone there. Such chaos reigned that it wasn't a house, it was a way-side inn.

Pevtsov decided to move away from Tyukhovs. He found a room without any difficulty; rumours of his spying were effective.

Oh, these small towns, scary and trampled; they're glad of any riff-raff just so long as decency is preserved. You may be a swindler or a thief, but they won't be gaoled because of you, their goods and chattels won't be confiscated because of you either, and you'll be welcome.

God alone knows what happened when Grandmother returned. The old woman would check one thing—gone, she'd check something else—several missing. She remembered the silver and went into the cupboard—the lock had gone.

"It's him," screamed Grandmother, "the convict! He's robbed me, the scoundrel, he's robbed me, the devil... And he's guzzled all mother's anisette, it was such a lovely colour."

Chapter Four

In the new flat, in a dark room with a single window overlooking an extension, Pevtsov spent his days—monotonous, scarcely distinguishable, grey and befogged by the late autumnal mists.

No new life had begun for Pevtsov. As if it had lingered on and now, like late grass, was being beaten and flattened by rain and mud.

Pevtsov thought that a decision would come; they would send him to another town. But it turned out that such cases were not dealt with so quickly; you had to wait and go on waiting for a long time.

Left on his own, Pevtsov thought he would take up some kind of work and throw himself into it heart and soul. But here he had deceived himself; no such work was forthcoming.

And the carpet along which he had been walking earlier, slipped from under his feet, vanished and left not a trace behind.

He must at all costs find the lost end, seize it, clutch hold and pull with all his strength, without respite, without thinking, without looking back. He must resume the life he had been living before prison, or fold his arms and succumb to the oppressive silence that flattens every indisputable *yes* and every unassailable *no*.

Pevtsov was stepping along a slippery boardwalk under a fine dusting of autumn rain.

He was forlornly greeted by wet houses that were truly an eyesore.

He walked along, thinking about their life, so forlorn, downtrodden and unnecessary, which ought to be crushed and torn up by the roots.

But did he know of any other life to replace the fib, the mutual minor harrassments, the vile malice? Could he name it? Could he say what it was called?

The decision would come, he would be sent to another town and there he would say...

Pevtsov started. Something damp had clapped him on the shoulder.

Grandmother Tyukhova was poking him with her broom.

"Give me my silver, give it to me, you beast! I shan't let you go, I got you put away, you stole my spoons ... my silver spoons ... bequeathed by my late father."

Pevtsov shifted his weight from foot to foot in silence.

But Grandmother was shrieking about the spoons that Pevtsov had stolen from her.

Passers-by were stopping, staring, sniggering.

"He stole some spoons! "

The fine dust of the autumn rain was sifting down behind the window, tinkling monotonously and drearily on the glass pane, and guarding, and watching.

Pevtsov rummaged with a candle through his things, shook out all the clothes, searched every nook and cranny in search of Grandmother's silver spoons.

And a voice kept saying above him:

"To think and to do are the same thing."

1903

Translated by Alex Miller

ALEXANDER KUPRIN

(1870–1938)

Alexander Kuprin was born in the small town of Narouchatov into the poor family of an office worker. He lost his father when he was quite young and lived on charity for many years, first with his mother in the Moscow Widows' Home, then in the Razumovsky Boarding School for Orphans (1876-80), and finally in the Cadet Corps. The conditions in these institutions were dismal: the orphans were treated roughly and were sent to the punishment room or whipped for the slightest offence. After finishing the Alexandrovsky Military School, Kuprin was assigned to the 46th Dnieper Infantry Regiment, but he found military service oppressive, with its "idiotic way of life" and constant insults and senseless drills. In 1894 he resigned and threw himself into journalism and creative writing.

From the first, Kuprin exhibited a compassion for the sad lot of the common man, for the fate of the "insulted and humiliated, as is illustrated by the story in this anthology.

By nature an active and energetic man, he took up dozens of different jobs. In the course of his life he was a military officer, a newspaper reporter, a labourer, a longshoreman, an athlete, a dramatic actor, a salesman in a store, a forester, a land surveyor, a circus performer, a gardener, a dental technician, an estate manager, a tender of pigs and a tobacco farmer. In one of his works he wrote: "I would like to be a horse, or a plant, or a fish for a day or two. Or a woman so I could experience giving birth. I would like to live the inner life and look at the world through the eyes of every person I meet." That talent—to see the world through the eyes of his heroes—is one of the most powerful aspects of Kuprin's writing. He was a master at telling a story: his descriptions terse, his wording accurate, his plots well constructed. Lev Tolstoy was delighted with his story "Allez!"

(1897), noting its laconicism, truthfulness and attention to detail.

Kuprin was sharply critical of the existing order and exposed those social conditions under which a person could not be sure of the morrow or could not even earn his daily bread.

A man of democratic convictions, he reacted positively to the news of the monarchy's downfall in Russia. In December, 1918, he called on Lenin with a proposal to publish a newspaper for the countryside. He began working with Maxim Gorky in the World Literature publishing house. It would seem that he would have accepted the new social order, which advanced the interests of the common people. However his life turned out differently. In 1919, Gatchina (a small town outside of Petrograd), where Kuprin was then living, was captured by White Army troops. As a former officer, Kuprin was ordered to report to headquarters. Fearing for his life and his family's safety, he agreed to edit the White Army newspaper, "Prinevsky Krai" (Neva Environs). When the White troops retreated, Kuprin left for Estonia, then for Finland and ended up in emigration. In 1920, Kuprin and his family moved to Paris. However, life far from his homeland was unbearable for him. "No, I cannot live in Europe," he wrote to his sister. He was even more candid in a letter to his old friend, the painter Ilya Repin: "The longer I am away from Russia, the more intensely I miss it, and the deeper I love it."

In May 1937, Kuprin returned to the Soviet Union. "I am happy that the Soviet government has given me the opportunity to return to my native land, to Moscow that is quite new to me," he said in an interview with reporters. "I am anxious to give the country new books and join the circle of Soviet writers."

A LITTLE WHITE LIE ***

Ivan Ivanovich Semenyuta was not a bad man. He was serious, diligent and pious, did not drink or smoke, and was not drawn to playing cards or spending time with women. But he was one of the unluckiest men on earth. His personality was dominated by one fatal characteristic—that of embarrassed timidity—and it was probably due to this characteristic that fate, which, as we all know, like a capricious woman, loves and obeys only those who are forceful and resolute, continually beat him down. Even in his schooldays Semenyuta was the scapegoat for the entire class. A mischief-maker would form a spitball and smack it into the French teacher's majestic baldspot with a skilful throw. At that very moment, Semenyuta would be waving a fly from his head. The Frenchman, red with fury, would scream: "Zemnut, you are a nasty boy! Au mur! Go to thee corner! "

During the recess the pale, innocent Semenyuta would be dragged off to the headmaster whose grey goatee shook and whose evil eyes sparkled through his gold-rimmed glasses. He would rhythmically jab Semenyuta's head with his old, petrified finger:

"A depraved student! A lit-tle bri-gand! A dis-grace to our in-sti-tu-tion! Ruf-fian! Block-head! "

Then he would conclude in a cold, businesslike tone of voice.

"After lunch send him to the punishment room for three days. No passes until Christmas and if he does it again, we

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1985

** This story reflects Kuprin's memories of the time he spent in the Moscow Widows' Home, where he lived with his mother from 1873 to 1877, following the death of his father.—*Ed.*

will beat him and expel him."

Then he would snap the poor boy loudly on the forehead and order him out in a threatening manner.

This scene was constantly repeated. If someone broke a window in the headmaster's house, or raided the neighbouring garden, the young prankster would succeed in getting away and hiding, but shy, quiet Semenyuta, who had taken no part in the escapade, would somehow turn out to be near the scene of the crime. And he would again be dragged off to be jabbed on the head and berated: "Bri-gand... Ruffian... Block-head..."

With all of this, he barely made it to the sixth grade. The only reason he was not expelled with ignominy, was because his mother, a pitiable, wretched old woman living in a charity home for widows, dragged herself all over town to the headmaster or the school priest, threw herself at their feet, embraced their legs, wet their knees with her copious tears, and begged:

"Do not ruin the boy. He is really very obedient and loving. It is just that he is so timid and frightened. The other boys make fun of him. It would be better if you flogged him."

Semenyuta was frequently and cruelly whipped, but this tried and true educational method did not help him. After two unsuccessful attempts to advance into the seventh grade, he was expelled, though, succumbing to his mother's tears, they did give him a certificate stating that he had completed the sixth grade.

After great sacrifice and much humiliation, his mother somehow managed to put together enough money to buy her son a set of clothes. A three-piece suit, a green, very light-weight coat, patched boots and a bowler hat were purchased at the rap-market. As for his undergarments his mother sewed them from her skirts and blouses.

The only thing left to do was find work. Unfortunately, a job was not forthcoming, as was Semenyuta's luck, though he spent an entire year racing about the enormous city from morning to night in search of the smallest, lowest paying job. He ate lunch and dinner in the widows' home: his mother would secretly bring him half of her meagre portion from the dining room. Finding a place to sleep proved to be

a more complicated problem, since the widows slept in large chambers with five to six women in each. But his mother begged the church psalm-reader and the housekeeper, and they were gracious enough to allow Semenyuta to sleep in the kitchen on two stools and a wooden chair.

Finally, after more than a year, work as a scribe was found in a government office at twenty-three rubles and eleven-and-a-half kopecks a month. A private solicitor, Yuvenaly Evpsikhievich Antonov, who had known Semenyuta's mother when she was young and well-to-do, found the position for him.

Semenyuta threw himself into the exhausting, dull work with all the enthusiasm and energy he could muster. He was the first to arrive in the office in the morning and was the last to leave, sometimes working evenings since he would do his fellow-workers' pressing assignments for mere kopecks. The other scribes looked down on him and were scornful. He did not try to make friends, did not play billiards and did not walk along the boulevard with young ladies during outdoor concerts. "A real recluse," they decided.

Semenyuta was happy: he had a small room, actually more like a closet, in an attic, dined for twenty kopecks in a Greek cafe and kept his own tea and sugar at home. He not only could afford to treat his mother to an apple or a dozen hard candies or a box of toffees, but toward the end of the year was able to buy himself a fairly decent suit and durable, squeaky shoes. Apparently his superiors valued his diligence for in his second year of work he was promoted and received a raise of five rubles. By the end of his second year he was accepted as a full-time employee and began to put a little money in the bank. But then, in the midst of this prosperity, fate raised its terrible head.

One evening Semenyuta worked in the office to the wee hours of the morning. Besides this, he had urgent, recopying work waiting for him at home. He went to bed at five in the morning and woke up at seven as usual, tired and pale, with dark circles under his bloodshot eyes and swollen eyelids. This time he did not appear in the office earlier than everyone, as was his habit, but was one of the last to arrive.

Before he even had time to sit down and organize his papers, a strange, terrifying feeling of anxiety overwhelmed

him. Some of his fellow-workers looked at him with hostility; others glanced up with curiosity, and still others turned away when his eyes met theirs. He did not understand what was going on, but his heart turned icy cold.

His alarm grew with each passing minute. As usual, at eleven o'clock a loud bell sounded announcing the director's arrival. Semenyuta started and from that moment on did not cease to shake with a slight, feverish trembling. He was not even surprised, but merely swayed as if he had been hit on the head, when the secretary leaned over his table and said severely, in an undertone: "His Excellency wants to see you in his office." As if in some horrible nightmare, Semenyuta stood up and with leaden steps staggered the entire length of the office, accompanied by the stares of his fellow-workers.

He had never been in that sanctuary and it surprised him so by its enormous size, grandiose, severe furniture and massive, red curtains that he did not immediately notice the small director sitting at a vast desk, looking like a sparrow on a huge platter.

"Come here, Semenyuta," the director said after Semenyuta had given him a low bow. "Tell me why you did it?"

"Did what, Your Excellency?"

"That you know better than I. Why did you break open the drawer in the executor's desk and steal the government stamps and money? Do not bother to deny it. We know everything."

"I... Your Excellency... I ... as God is my witness..."

The director, a very liberal, reserved, humane man and a professor of financial law at the university, suddenly struck the table with his fist in fury.

"How dare you use the Lord's name in vain! Last night you were here alone and remained until one in the morning. Besides you, there was only Ankudin, the guard, but he has been with us over forty years and I would sooner suspect my own mother. So confess, and I will let you go without notifying the authorities."

Semenyuta's legs trembled so fiercely that he sank to his knees.

"Your Excell... God is my witness ... my word of honour... Your Excell... I swear to God I did not... Your Excell..."

"Stand up," the director ordered in disgust, hiding his feet under his chair. "Do you think I do not see by your face and eyes that you spent the night in wild revelry. I know that you embezzlers, or rather, *thieves* (the director cruelly emphasized the word) go straight to a tavern or a brothel. I do not wish to sully the reputation of my establishment so I will not notify the police, but remember, if anyone requests a recommendation, I will have nothing positive to say about you. Good day."

He pushed the button to sound the electric bell.

For the next three years Semenyuta lived a savage, unhealthy, terrifying existence. He lived in a poorly lit basement where he rented the darkest, dampest, coldest corner. Mikheyevna, a woman who bought tiny bleak fish by the basketful from fishermen and made them into paddies to sell at the market for a kopeck apiece, lived in another part of the room. The third and lightest corner was inhabited by the shoemaker, Ivan Nikolayevich, who sat on his bench and tapped all day, and his numerous children and ever-pregnant wife. On workdays he was a gentle, kind, good-natured man, but on holidays drink transformed him into a bully and a bruiser. In the fourth corner the laundress Ilyinishna, the mistress of the basement, pounded her huge, wooden rolling-press. She was a peevish shrew and a drunkard.

Semenyuta himself could not have told you what he lived on. He taught the shoemaker's oldest children how to read and write and in return received a breakfast of tea and black bread. He wrote petitions for people in restaurants and taverns, as well as addressing envelopes and writing letters for the illiterate at the post office in the morning. He also gave lessons to the children of a merchant who lived on the edge of town for three rubles a month. Occasionally some copying work turned up. His main occupation was scouring the city in search of employment, but his outward appearance did not inspire confidence. He was unshaven, his hair was long and dishevelled. His pale face had an unhealthy, swollen appearance, and his shoes gaped up the toes. He was not yet a drunkard, but had begun to imbibe.

But there were four days a year when he tried to rouse himself and improve his desolate appearance. These were

the New Year, Easter, Whitsunday and St. Concordia's Day.

On the eve of those days he, expending great efforts and suffering deep humiliation, managed to scrape together fifteen kopecks—five for a bath, five for a haircut and shave from a barber working without a permit in a basement similar to his own, and five for a bar of chocolate or an orange. Then he called on one of two former friends, who, while embarrassed by his visits, nevertheless received him with feelings of pity and disgust. One was Pshonkin and the other Massa. Afraid to wear out his welcome, Semenyuta took turns calling on them.

On this particular occasion, as always, he drank the cup of tea offered, groaned, sighed and shook his head sadly.

"Are things that bad, old man?" Massa asked.

"It's a sin to complain, but yes, things are very bad indeed."

"You shouldn't have done that terrible thing."

"Nikolai Stepanovich ... as God is my witness ... I didn't ... I swear I didn't do it."

"There, there. Don't cry. I was only joking. I believe you. Misfortune can strike anyone. Maybe you need some money? I can spare twenty-five kopecks."

"No, thank you. I do not need money, and even if I did I wouldn't take it. But if you would be so kind as to lend me a suit coat for a couple of hours. An old one. Please, don't refuse, my dear friend. And don't worry, I had a bath yesterday. I am clean."

"You're an odd fellow, Semenyuta. What do you need a suit for? This is the third year in a row you have borrowed one from me. Why?"

"You see, I have an aunt. She is an old woman and will die soon, and I am her only heir. I need to pay a visit on holidays. She does not have a large sum of money, but five hundred rubles is five hundred rubles. Nothing to laugh at."

"All right, take the coat, and God be with you."

So after polishing his shoes to a shine, colouring the holes with ink, carefully trimming the fringe at the bottom of his pants, and putting on a paper collar and false shirtfront and a red tie which he kept wrapped in newspaper especially for these occasions, Semenyuta trudged to the widows' home at the other end of the city to visit his mother. In the warm,

grandiose antechamber the heavy-set, white-haired porter Nikita stood like a statue in his red livery with the coat-of-arms. He had known Semenyuta since he was five years old, but looked down on him and did not answer his greeting.

"Hello, Nikita. How are you?"

The proud porter remained silent, as if turned to stone.

"How is Mother?" Semenyuta asked, thoroughly disheartened, as he hung his coat on the rack.

"What can happen to her?" the porter answered tersely. "She's a strong old lady. She'll be around a long time."

As usual, Semenyuta had come in the evening, when the defect of his suit would not be so noticeable. With silent steps he walked through huge, vaulted chambers, whose walls were painted a soothing green colour, past the snow-white beds with fluffed feather mattresses and mountains of pillows, and past the old women who watched him with curiosity from over the rims of their glasses.

Aromas familiar since childhood—the smell of herbs, mint, wax, and floor polish, and an additional, undeterminable, peculiar smell of clean, tidy old age—enveloped Semenyuta and his heart was wrung.

He finally reached the chamber where his mother lived. There were six beds with their heads against the wall and near each one, a little wardrobe decorated with old portraits in frames covered with sea-shells. In the center of the room a huge lamp was suspended from the ceiling, illuminating the table where three old women were playing a never-ending game of preference, and two others were knitting, occasionally analyzing the hands just played with a fervour. That was all so painfully familiar to Semenyuta.

"Concordia Sergeyevna, someone to see you."

"It isn't Vanya, is it?"

His mother stood up quickly, raising her glasses to her forehead. A ball of yarn fell on the floor and rolled away, pulling out several stitches of knitting.

"Vanya! My dear boy! I waited and waited and was beginning to think I wouldn't see my brave lad. Come over here. I dreamed of you last night."

With a trembling hand she led him to her bed, where her own small table stood. She covered it with a table cloth, lit a wax church candle, took a teapot, cups, a teabox and a

sugar bowl from the wardrobe, and bustled about, her old, dry, knotted hands trembling.

A staid, elderly chamber-maid of about fifty in a dark blue uniform and a white apron, walked by.

"Domna," Concordia Sergeyevna said a little ingratiatingly. "Please bring us some hot water. Vanya has come to visit me."

Domna gave Semenyuta a low, dignified bow, as they used to do in Moscow.

"Good evening, Ivan Ivanovich. Haven't seen you in ages. Your mama misses you so. I'll bring the water right away, madam."

While she went for the water, mother and son were silent, searching each other's hearts with quick, penetrating glances. When a person has been separated from a loved one for a long period of time, he can better see the signs of deterioration which merciless time never ceases to inflict but which are not as noticeable in daily intercourse.

"You do not look well, Vanya," the old woman said, and her dry brittle hand stroked her son's, which lay on the table. "You are pale and tired-looking."

"It is my work, *Maman*. I am now in the public eye. A small fry, but the entire office is on my shoulders. I work from morning to night, like a horse, but I must make my career, don't you agree?"

"Do not drive yourself too hard, Vanya."

"Don't worry, *Maman*. I'm hardy, and it's well worth my efforts, for I am to receive a higher rank with a raise and a bonus at Easter. Then your lonely life here will end. I will rent an apartment and you will come live with me. Life will be wonderful! I will go to work in the morning and you will stay home and keep house."

The old woman was so touched that tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down her deep wrinkles.

"I hope so, Vanya. I truly hope so. God grant you good health and patience. You look so..."

"Don't worry, I'll manage, *Maman*."

During his short and infrequent visits to his mother, that timid, broken man spoke in a rather impudent manner, unconsciously imitating the good-for-nothings whom he had seen loafing about the office in his better days. This was

where the ridiculous word *maman* had come from. He had always called his mother "mama" (and even now did so mentally), but there was something carefree and aristocratic in the word *maman*. In those moments, looking at his mother's worn, shrunken face, he simultaneously felt horror, tenderness, guilt and pity.

Domna brought the hot water, placed it on the table, gave another low bow and quietly left.

Concordia Sergeyevna brewed some tea. Ancient, curious, old women with tiny, beady eyes, and resembling little grey mice, darted past their little table under various pretexts. They all remembered Semenyuta from the time he was five years old. They stopped, clapped their hands and shook and shook their heads in amazement.

"My goodness, Vanya! I did not recognize you at all. You've gotten so big. I remember when you were just a little tyke. You were such an active boy, a real hero. We called you General Skobelev.* You used to tease me, and called the late Nadezhda Fyodorovna Gololobova a grey granny with a tail. It seems like only yesterday..."

Concordia Sergeyevna unceremoniously waved her hand at the old woman.

"Excuse me, but my son and I have important things to discuss. Would you please leave us?"

"How are you, *Maman*?" Semenyuta asked, drinking his tea with plenty of sugar.

"I am an old woman. It is time for me to pass on to the next world. Your sisters have their troubles, though. You, thank the Lord, are on your feet and in the public eye, but they are in difficult straits. Katya's husband has gone to the dogs. He plays cards, drinks, and comes home intoxicated every night. He also beats Katya. It looks as though he will soon lose his job at the railroad, and Katya is pregnant again. He is good at only one thing, the scoundrel."

"Yes, *Maman*, you are right. He is a scoundrel."

"Shhh. Quiet. Don't say such things out loud," his

* Skobelev, Mikhail (1843-82). Russian general. He gained fame during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. A brilliant commander, he exhibited great personal bravery and enjoyed immense popularity among his soldiers and officers.—Ed.

mother whispered. "They listen to everything here and then there's no end of gossip. Yes, where was I? And I don't know if Zoya is any better off. Her husband is a kind, gentle man—all Poles are affectionate. But as far as women are concerned, he is a real wolf, God forgive me for saying so. He throws away all his money on them, the shameless fool. Takes them riding, buys all kinds of presents. And poor, foolish Zoya is still madly in love with him! I don't understand it. A few days ago she found pictures in the desk (she sneaked the key) which he had taken of his Dulceneas in that state, you know, without anything on. Zoya tried to poison herself with opium. They barely saved her. But why am I telling you all this unpleasant news. Tell me about yourself, only speak quietly. Even the walls have ears."

Semenyuta let his imagination run wild and began to lie shamelessly, occasionally contradicting what he had said on a previous visit. He did not notice, but his mother did, though she remained silent. Her old eyes simply grew sadder and more searching.

Work was going very well. His superiors valued Semenyuta and he was loved by his fellow-workers. True, Traktatov and Preobrazhensky envied him and plotted against him, but they could do no harm. They were fools and understood nothing, not to mention their education. One had been expelled from a seminary and the other was simply a crook. But no one could say a bad word against Semenyuta. He had mastered all the office secrets thoroughly. The head of his department shook hands with him, and had even invited him to supper several days before. There had been dancing. And his daughter, Lyubov, had come over with another young lady and asked Semenyuta whether he preferred a rose or a lily of the valley. She had blushed when he chose the lily, asking how he knew it was she. "My heart told me," he had answered.

"It's time for you to marry, Vanya."

"Wait a bit, *Maman*. It is still early. Let me try out my wings a bit. But she is pretty. Very pretty."

"You naughty boy."

"Things are going well thus far, knock a wood. Nothing to complain about. Not long ago the department head clapped me on the shoulder as he was passing by and said: 'Keep

at it, young man. I have my eye on you and you can count on my support. Actually, I've got something in mind for you."

He talked on and on, kindled by his own fantasy. He crossed his legs casually and twirled his moustache, and his mother watched his mouth, bewitched by the magic tale. The spell was broken by a bell ringing in the distance. It got closer and closer and finally Domna entered the room:

"Supper, ladies."

"Wait for me," his mother whispered. "I want to look at you again."

Twenty minutes later she returned, carrying a plate with a piece of salted sturgeon and several slices of delicious, black bread. On previous occasions she had returned with jellied meat or potato salad and herring.

"Eat, Vanya, eat," she encouraged him gently. "Don't disdain our widow's fare. You loved sturgeon when you were little."

"*Maman*, I beg you, I am not at all hungry. We dined at the Prague Restaurant in honour of the executor. By the way, I brought you an orange from there. Here you are."

But in spite of his words, he ate the plate of food with a voracious appetite, and did not notice the tears streaming down his mother's wrinkled cheeks.

The time had come to leave. His mother wanted to accompany him to the antechamber, but he remembered his shabby coat and declined the courtesy.

"*Maman*, the longer the farewell, the more the tears. And you might catch cold. You must take care of yourself."

In the antechamber, Nikita looked on with an inexpressible haughtiness as Semenyuta hurriedly put on his ragged coat and bedraggled hat.

"Well, Nikita, life goes on," Semenyuta said quietly. "The important thing is not to despair. Ah, I should give you a ten-kopeck tip, but I don't seem to have any change."

"Sure," the porter commented scornfully. "I know, you have only large bills. Go on, go on, and close the door. You'll catch me my death of a cold."

When will fate look kindly on poor Semenyuta instead of tormenting him so mercilessly? Or will it? I think so.

What would it cost the whimsical, inconstant beauty to

spite her favourites and gently caress the poor slave.

Perhaps that old, honest watchman Ankudin, falling ill and feeling death close at hand, will send his grandson Gri-sha to the office saying:

"Tell His Excellency that I'm fixing to die and before the end I want to tell him an important secret."

The general will come to see Ankudin in his tiny basement room. The dying man, gathering his last bits of strength will crawl from the bed and fall at the general's feet.

"Your Excellency, my conscience has bothered me all these years. I'm dying and want to confess my sins. That money and those stamps... I took them. The devil tempted me. Forgive me for harming an innocent man. The money and stamps are here. In the upper right-hand drawer of the bureau."

The next day the director will send Pshonkin or Massa to Semenyuta, will walk arm in arm with him before the entire office, and will tell everyone about Ankudin, the stolen money, and Semenyuta's undeserved suffering. He will publicly ask his forgiveness, shake his hand, and moved to tears, kiss him.

And Semenyuta will live with his mother for many more years in quiet, modest, warm comfort. The old woman will never hint to her son that she knew of his deception, and he will never tell her that he knew she knew. That sore point will always be carefully avoided. A little, white lie is a quivering, fragile flower which wilts when touched.

Miracles really do happen in life. Or is that only in Christmas stories?

1916

Translated by Tracy Kuehn

VIKENTY VERESAYEV

(1867–1945)

Vikenty Veresayev, whose father was a doctor, finished the Department of History and Philology at St. Petersburg University, but in 1888, already a Candidate of History, he entered the medical department of Derpt University. However, his main occupation was writing.

His first work was published in 1885. Veresayev lived a long life, and was a contemporary of Lev Tolstoy, Vladimir Korolenko, Vsevolod Garshin, Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, as well as Mikhail Sholokhov, Alexander Tvardovsky and Leonid Leonov. He was party to the intelligentsia's ideological searches at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries: enthusiasm for and later disillusionment with populism, interest in the growing Marxist movement, sympathy for the conditions of the working class and protest against its oppression by those in power. In his works Veresayev always described historical events and facts with the utmost accuracy, relying on his vast knowledge of life. In his short novel "Doctor's Notes" (1895-1901) he described the formation of the average intellectual's ideological outlook, and in the short novel "The Turning Point" (1901), which met with Lenin's approval, he tells of events on the eve of the first Russian revolution of 1905.

In April 1901, Veresayev was fired from the hospital where he worked, his apartment was searched, and he was forbidden to live in major cities for two years—all due to his progressive beliefs. In June 1904, Veresayev, as a surgeon, was called to military service. The Russian-Japanese war had begun. After seeing this senseless war, which the tsarist government had gotten Russia into, Veresayev came to the conclusion that the existing social structure had outlived itself. His story "Marya Petrovna", written in 1915, during the First World War, is a strong protest against the inhumanity of war.

Veresayev welcomed the Revolution of 1917 and devoted himself to cultural and educational work. In 1925 he wrote to Gorky: "I have begun to research Pushkin and am writing my memories." This titanic effort took up the remaining twenty years of his life and resulted in two of his best books, "True Stories About the Past" and "Notes for Myself". They reflect the history of Russia, the writer's philosophical thoughts of love, death, the fate of art, and its influence on the life of every individual.

She learned of the tragedy three days before. Her eldest son's widow, who was a saleswoman at *Muir and Merilitz*, came to see her before lunch. For about five minutes she absent-mindedly talked of trivial things, but her eyes were large, guarded and serious. Then she sighed, grew pale and said in a trembling voice:

"Mama, prepare yourself ... something has happened to Vasya."

She kept her in suspense for another minute and then pulled a newspaper from her pocket and pointed to the list of killed and wounded, where it was written:

"Died from wounds ... Golikov, Vassily Ivanovich, Ensign."

He was Marya Petrovna's youngest son.

For the next three days she ran all over Moscow in order to find out more about her son: where he had died and whether she could receive his body for burial. She stood timidly with an imploring expression in reception rooms, and spoke deferentially with important clerks and angry officials, but her face was such a dull, yellowish colour, her eyes so pale, and her voice so uncertain that all the functionaries to whom she turned impatiently pursed their lips and turned away, saying:

"Madam, I have already explained..."

She went to the evacuation point at the Nikolayevsky Barracks, then took the streetcar as far as the Astrakhansky Barracks, and then went on to the military hospital. She sent telegrams to the main headquarters and to the regiment in which her son had served. But she did not find out anything, and there was nothing more she could do. As it was

impossible for her to remain in her damp room, where her knitting machine stood in a corner and where her neighbour and relatives indifferently expressed their condolences and eulogized the deceased, she wandered the streets in her old fox coat, stopping at intersections, staring motionlessly ahead with dry eyes, and then automatically moving on. She shed no tears. Her heart had shrunk into a frozen, prickly knot, and she could not inhale deeply. There was no escape from the pain and horror.

Cars with red crosses weaved along the streets, and emergency streetcars slid along the rails. Through the windows she could see yellowish, emaciated faces and bandages, bandages and more bandages. Bright pictures and postcards hung in the windows of stationary stores, and they were all about the war. Marya Petrovna could not tear herself away from the postcard: a German soldier with a snarl on his face, his helmet jauntily pushed back on his head and a rifle in his hand, was standing with one leg propped on a woman's body. There were corpses of children all around and smoke from a fire swirled in the distance.

Her heart was filled with horror: a rabid, merciless force had been unleashed and was enveloping the earth. Murder, terror, and mutilation reigned! Why? Who had incited them? Why had they suddenly attacked Russia? Look, what they had done?

It grew dark. In a low bell-tower, dwarfed by a seven-story building, the bells rang for vespers. Marya Petrovna remembered how she had been able to cry the previous day during the requiem when the choir had sung "With the Saints, Repose" and entered the church. It was empty, depressing and solemn, and the words of the priest echoed in the silence. In the half-light, above a forest of tiny flames, a meek face and raised hand shone over the inscription: "Come unto me..."

Marya Petrovna gazed at the mural, moaned softly, and crossed herself woodenly. Suddenly, she began to tremble with malice and she hurriedly left. In a dark deserted corner behind the church, she pressed her cheek to the brick wall, clenched her teeth and groaned, staring into the dark with her dry eyes full of hatred.

Soon she was back on the streets, grieving and utterly

alone, her heart a prickly ball which made it hard for her to breathe. Oh, if only to be allowed to kneel next to the precious body and be able to kiss his dear, curly-haired head with its tight ringlets on the temples and the bloody wounds, and release the flood of tears building up inside her.

A huge arch of triumph loomed in the middle of the street. To the left, at the bottom of a square, a cupola and towers rose and the face of a clock shone. The train station. There, two months earlier, Marya Petrovna had seen her son off to the war.

Not realizing how she got there, she found herself at the station. She wandered through the cafeteria and went out on the deserted platforms covered by a metal roof. Guards with badges swept the dark asphalt with long brooms. On a distant platform under the light from an electric lamp, crowds of soldiers churned, and medics with red cross armbands raced about.

She walked toward them. A long, green train stood along one platform. Stretchers with the wounded were being carried from inside the building and placed near the train. Other soldiers stood in large clusters, leaning on crutches, or with bandaged arms and heads. Marya Petrovna, filled with sadness, stared at the men. Suddenly she recoiled. Good Lord, who were they? They were dressed in strange uniforms, talked to each other in a language she did not understand, and were surrounded by Russian soldiers carrying bayonets.

She approached a man in a railroad cap with red piping. "Who are those men?" she asked.

"Prisoners."

"Prisoners!" she raised her eyebrows. "Austrians?"

"Some. Those over there are Germans."

"Where are they being taken?"

"To Orel." The railroad man suddenly grew severe. "Unauthorized persons are not allowed here." Saying this, he strode away.

Marya Petrovna stared with her eyes open wide. So that was what they looked like!

A Russian ensign in glasses was speaking German with a bearded prisoner obviously out of boredom. It was

strange: the German looked like such an ordinary fellow with his red hair and little, round cap, and he smiled so good-naturedly, you'd think he was a nice person. But those villains had perpetrated such horrors! A second German, young, tall and handsome, with a brown mustache, stood next to him. It was immediately clear that this one was a beast—he was so proud! He stared past everyone, not deigning to look at those around him and frowning scornfully.

A sergeant-major ran over and ordered the prisoners to line up in pairs and march forward. They moved in an uneven, swaying column, hobbling, leaning on crutches and holding each other's arms. The handsome German with the brown mustache moved as well. Oh my God! He only had one leg! His pant leg was empty all the way to the groin where his left leg should have been. He hopped along on his good leg, both of his muscular arms gripping a long stick.

An army doctor with a small, grey beard and black eyebrows briskly walked past and angrily shouted something to the sergeant-major who, disconcerted, gave the command to halt.

The prisoners stopped. The doctor shouted at the medics near the train. The bearded German joked merrily with the other prisoners while supporting the handsome, one-legged soldier under the elbow. Marya Petrovna stared at the empty pant leg flapping in the air. The one-legged man, still frowning contemptuously, rubbed his frozen hands, and coughed. Though it was only the beginning of October, it had been terribly cold for five days and the wind blew dry, biting snow on the platform. The German coughed frequently—he was obviously ill and his overcoat was light. "Why don't they let them in the cars?" Marya Petrovna thought angrily, still staring at the German with hostility. He coughed, his hands were chilled to the bone, and he hopped on one leg, but he was still so arrogant! He did not look at anyone, as if the others did not exist.

Another doctor, with a face like a streetcar conductor and a raspy voice, came over and told the sergeant-major to send eighty men to the other end of the train.

The prisoners moved forward and began to enter the cars, while more prisoners moved up from behind. These were

Austrians, in grey coats and filthy boots. A huge Austrian with a young, childish face leaned on crutches, carefully holding his bandaged leg in the air. Another Austrian, a ridiculously short fellow with a pudgy face, stood next to him. They spoke quietly to one another in Polish, and one could tell by the way they talked that they were close friends. The short man straightened the big one's coat and buttoned his top button. The big soldier had such a kind, childish face, and his huge, bandaged leg hung so helplessly between the crutches, that something moved in Marya Petrovna's breast. So many young, healthy people had been maimed!

They carried the seriously wounded into the car and brought out more from the station. Stretchers stood in a long row on the platform. A Hungarian hussar in tight, red riding-breeches who was wounded in the chest lay at Marya Petrovna's feet. He had a very unpleasant face with thin, moist lips beneath a thin, handlebar mustache and nasty, black eyes which resembled small olives. Marya Petrovna turned away.

A heavy-set woman with two black plumes on her round hat, bent over the stretchers and spoke in German with one seriously wounded soldier. She straightened up and sighed loudly:

"He says he has three children and a sick wife at home and no one there knows what has happened to him. Poor man."

Eyes full of desolate grief looked up from the hay pillow. Death had already left its mark on the sunken face, and his blond mustache hung over his lips like on a corpse.

The heavy-set woman wanted to express her grief and sympathy, and said in broken German:

"Ihr abscheulicher schlechter Kaiser! Warum hat er diesen Krieg angefangen! *

There was much bustling about connected with loading the train. Medics hurriedly carried stretchers into the cars. The sergeant-major ran over and bumped into an ensign rushing by.

"Another fifteen men in number five," the ensign or-

* Your terrible, bad Kaiser. Why did he begin this war!

dered. "The rest of the less seriously wounded in the other cars."

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant-major began to count off the prisoners, touching each on the shoulder. The last was the small, pudgy Austrian.

"Fifteen! Lead them forward. Look lively!" the sergeant-major ordered the soldier in charge of the convoy.

The large Austrian with the childish face who was on crutches remained on the platform. He moaned pleadingly. His small friend reached out to calm him, and then tried to explain something to the sergeant-major with his hands.

"Well!" the sergeant-major said threateningly.

"Get them moving! Hurry it up!" the ensign ordered.

The small Austrian walked away with the others, and the big soldier on crutches watched him go. In his childish eyes Marya Petrovna read a resigned readiness to suffer and a feeling of the inevitability of everything that might happen to him.

Marya Petrovna turned to the heavy-set woman:

"How can they do that? Why separate them?" she asked in her colourless timid voice.

"Separate whom?" the woman asked in annoyance, as everyone who talked with Marya Petrovna did.

Marya Petrovna did not answer and simply hung her head. She should have told the ensign, explained everything, so he would have ordered that they not be separated. The short one would have gotten the one on crutches settled in the car and would have looked after him, and both of them would have been happier. Now they would be taken to Orel and separated forever, one ending up in one troop and the second in another. Who would listen to them if they pleaded to stay together? Marya Petrovna, with the feelings of a mother, was very sorry for the crippled soldier with the childish face, and ashamed that she was unable to help him.

The Hungarian hussar with the unpleasant face lay on a stretcher, clutching his torn coat about him, his teeth chattering from the cold. His twisted lips beneath his thin, black mustache were blue. As with the other prisoners, it was the expression in his eyes that shocked Marya Petrovna: he

stared unseeing at the metal roof; completely drawn into himself in his agony and not even thinking to ask for sympathy or help, as if all was as it should be. He lay shivering among a crowd of people as if in an uninhabited desert. His teeth chattered and his bent knees in their filthy riding-britches trembled. On his temples, under the band of his cap, Marya Petrovna could see dark, tight curls.

Suddenly she had trouble breathing. With shaking hands she hurriedly unbuttoned her fox coat, threw it off and covered the Hungarian. Hot waves swelled in her chest and throat. She leaned over the curly head of the Hungarian, kissed him and began to cry: for her son, for the frozen Hungarian, and for all those mutilated young men. There was no longer hatred in her heart, there was only a feeling of overwhelming sorrow at the tragedy which had befallen everyone and made all men equal.

1915

Translated by Tracy Kuehn

IVAN BUNIN

(1870—1953)

Ivan Bunin had been living abroad for a quarter of a century when, in 1944, he wrote his "First Day of Lent", inspired by love of Russia and the Russian soul, mysterious and unpredictably beautiful. Bunin was loyal to this love through the whole of his long life.

His life was fraught with tragic mistakes and delusions, but his service to the cause of true art was always unchangeably dedicated. Although Bunin championed Gorky's views in the struggle against decadence groupings, in 1917 he found himself on the other side of the barricade from his old friend. He did not accept the Revolution, and together with the retreating White army came to the Crimea, then continued to Constantinople, Berlin, and finally Paris. He eked out a wretched existence there. Things looked up a bit when in 1933 he was awarded the Nobel Prize, but he donated a third of the money towards the needy Russian writers living in Paris, and after that followed years and years of dire poverty, years when he was harassed by the thought of daily bread for himself and his wife Vera Nikolayevna Muromtseva-Bunina.

During the Second World War, Bunin wrathfully condemned fascism and, having flatly refused to work for pro-fascist publications, moved to the south of France with his wife. They had no money, the food was inadequate, but these privations did not break Bunin's spirit and as before he refused to write so much as a word for publication in those European countries which had been occupied by the Germans. In his small villa at Grasse he sheltered escaping Soviet prisoners of war, he listened raptly to news about the fighting on the Eastern front, and firmly believed that Russia was invincible, that she would scour the invaders from the land, as she had always done before, and

that there was no defeating the staunchness of the Russian people. In those years of trials, when whatever had estranged him from the new Soviet state became of secondary importance and the fate of his Motherland was all that mattered, Bunin wrote some of his best stories imbued with his heart-wringing love and nostalgic remembrance of Russia, stories about the staunchness, fortitude and inimitable enchantment of the Slav soul. Collected under the title of "Shadowed Paths", they were published in New York in the spring of 1943.

Bunin's stories were highly acclaimed in his lifetime by his fellow-writers Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, Alexander Kuprin and others, and as highly lauded after his death by prominent Soviet authors. The poet Alexander Tvardovsky has written this: "Bunin's indisputable and lasting achievement in the service of art is, above all, that he developed and raised to the heights of perfection the purely Russian genre of short story which has received world-wide recognition. The composition is free and extraordinarily comprehensive, the plot is not strictly outlined, rather it emerges from the writer's personal impressions of a phenomenon or a character he has observed, and more often than not the story does not have finis put at the end meaning that all the questions and problems raised have been fully solved. These Russian prose works—real life impressions, transformed and generalised, of course, by the artist's creative thought—strive in their endings to blend with and become dissolved in the same reality which engendered them, leaving the reader free to mentally continue them, and to work out the people's destinies, the ideas and problems to his own satisfaction."

*CHANG'S DREAMS**

What difference does it make about whom a story is told. Everyone who has ever lived on earth deserves it.

Once upon a time Chang came to know the world and the Captain, his master, with whom his earthly existence became united. A whole six years had passed since then, they flowed away like sand in the ship's sandglass.

Here it was night again—dream or reality?—and again morning was coming—reality or dream? Chang was old, Chang was a drunkard, he dozed all the time.

It was winter in the town of Odessa. The weather was mean and glum, even worse than that Chinese weather had been when Chang and the Captain met for the first time. A fine, stinging snow was falling; the wind drove it at a slant along the slippery ice-clad asphalt of the deserted esplanade and spitefully whipped the face of every Jew who, hunching and thrusting his hands into his pockets, ran to the right or to the left with inept mincing steps. Beyond the harbour, also deserted, beyond the gulf misted with snow, the bare shores were only faintly visible. The mole seemed to be completely enveloped in thick, rising grey smoke; from morning to night the sea rolled its frothing waves over the mole. And the wind whistled shrilly in the telephone wires...

On days such as this life in town begins late. Chang and the Captain do not wake up early. Six years—is it much or little? In those six years Chang and the Captain have grown old, although the Captain is not yet forty, and their life has changed drastically. They no longer sail the seas, they have been bilged, as the sailors say, and they live not where they once lived, but in a narrow and rather gloomy street, in the attic of a five-storey house smelling of coal and inhabited by

Jews of the type who come home only in the evening and eat supper with their hats on, pushed to the back of the head. The room in which Chang and the Captain live is large and cold, the ceiling is low. For another thing, it is always dusky in this room: the two windows in the slanting roof are small and round, much like portholes. Between the windows stands a chest of drawers of sorts, and along the wall—an old iron bedstead. That is all there is in their bleak dwelling, if you do not count the fireplace from which a fresh wind is always blowing.

Chang sleeps in the corner behind the fireplace. The Captain sleeps on the bed. Anyone who has ever lived in attics will easily picture this bed, with the springs sagging down almost to the floor, and the state of the mattress on it; as for the grimy pillow, it is so thin that the Captain has to stuff his pea jacket under it. However, even on this bed the Captain sleeps very soundly, lying on his back with his eyes closed and his face grey—as motionless as a corpse. Oh, what a wonderful bed he used to have! A trim, tall bed with pull-out drawers, a deep, cosy bed, with fine, slippery sheets, and cool snow-white pillows. But even then, even in a swell, the Captain did not sleep so soundly as he does now; he grows very tired in the course of the day, and then he need not worry now if he oversleeps. And, what glad news can a new day bring him? Once, there were two truths in life, perpetually changing places—the first truth was that life was inexpressibly beautiful, and the second that life was only possible for madmen. Nowadays the Captain declares that there is, always was, and shall be forevermore only one truth, the ultimate truth of the Jew Job, a wise man from an unknown tribe, from Ecclesiastes. Very often, sitting in the beer hall, the Captain says: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw high, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." Just the same the days and nights still exist, and here it is night again with morning coming again. And the Captain and Chang wake up.

But the Captain, though he is awake, does not open his eyes. What he is thinking about in that moment is not known even to Chang, lying on the floor before the never

heated fireplace from which a cool smell of the sea comes all night long. Chang knows only one thing, that the Captain will remain lying thus for no less than an hour. After glancing at the Captain out of the corner of his eye, Chang closes his eyes again and falls into a doze. Chang is also a drunkard, in the morning he is also queasy, weak, and feeling that languid aversion for the world which everyone who sails the seas and suffers from sea-sickness is so familiar with. And so, falling into a doze in that early morning hour, Chang sees a tedious, dreary dream.

This is what he sees.

An old, slant-eyed Chinaman came up on deck, squatted on his haunches, and started whining, begging everyone who walked past him to buy the basket of rotten little fishes which he had brought to sell. The day was dusty and cold on that wide Chinese river. In the Chinaman's boat with a reed sail rocking on the muddy water, sat a puppy—a ginger-coloured pup with something of both the fox and the wolf about him, and a collar of thick, coarse fur round his neck. He swept his black eyes sternly and intelligently over the tall metal side of the ship, and held his ears pricked up.

"Better sell me your dog," the ship's young captain, standing on his bridge with nothing to do, shouted in a loud, merry voice to the Chinaman as if he were deaf.

The Chinaman, Chang's first master, glanced up and, astounded by the shout and his stroke of luck, began to bow and lisp: "Velly good dog, velly good dog!" And the pup was bought—for only a dollar—and named Chang, and that very same day sailed off with his new master to Russia, and at first, for three whole weeks, he was so terribly sea-sick, so dazed, that he did not see anything—not the ocean, not Singapore, not Colombo...

It was the beginning of autumn in China, the season of bad weather. And Chang began to feel sick as soon as they came out into the mouth of the river. Rain and murk came sweeping straight at them, white-caps flickered and flashed, the greyish-green water hurried somewhere nervously and senselessly, swaying and splashing, the flat banks moved farther and farther apart, vanishing in the fog, and there was more and more water around the ship. Chang, his coat glistening with silver raindrops, and the Captain in his raincoat

with the hood raised stood on the bridge, which felt higher than ever. The Captain gave the orders, while Chang shivered and flinched away from the wind. The water grew ever wider, it spread over the grey horizon and became one with the foggy sky. The wind ripped the spray off the large, roaring waves, hurled itself at the ship blindly, whistling in the yards and noisily slapping the canvas tents down below, as the sailors in their hobnailed boots and wet capes untied them and rolled them up. The wind was on the lookout for a chance to hit the ship a really telling blow, and the moment the ship, which had been bowing slowly to the wind, turned rather sharply to the right, the wind lifted her on to a wave so tall and seething that she teetered on the crest, crashed down, burying her nose in the foam, and in the charterhouse a coffee cup the waiter had forgotten to remove fell off the table to break into clinking smithereens. And after that all hell broke loose!

All kinds of days followed: now the sun scorched them with fire from the sparkling blue skies, now sinister clouds massed together and discharged bolt upon bolt of terrifying thunder and torrents of rain fell on the ship and the sea; and the ship rolled incessantly, even when in port. Chang, utterly exhausted by his sufferings, did not once in those three weeks leave his corner in the hot, darkish passage between the vacant second-class cabins on the quarter-deck, and lay near the high threshold of the door which opened only once a day when the Captain's servant brought him his food. And of the whole long voyage to the Red Sea Chang remembered only the laboured creaking of the timbers, his nausea and the sinking of his heart which went plummeting into the abyss together with the vibrating stern or else was sent flying upward, and that prickly sensation of mortal fear when into the upended stern, which had suddenly toppled sideways, with the screw propellor rattling in the air, smashed a veritable mountain of water with the roar of a firing gun and, blocking out the daylight, poured down the thick glass of the portholes in turbid streams. Chang, lying ill, heard the Captain shouting commands in the distance, he heard the rattling whistles of the bosun, the clatter of the sailors' boots somewhere overhead, the splashing and the slapping of the water, through his half-closed eyes he made out the

darkish passage cluttered with straw bales of tea, and became befuddled, dizzy from the heat, from nausea and the strong smell of the tea...

Here Chang's dream breaks off.

He starts and opens his eyes: no, this is not a wave hitting the stern, it is the door downstairs slammed shut by someone. And the next thing, the Captain clears his throat noisily and slowly gets up from his sagging bed. He pulls on and laces his down-at-heel boots, takes his black pea jacket with the brass buttons from under his pillow, puts it on and walks to the chest of drawers, while Chang, shivering in his threadbare ginger coat, rises from the floor, and yawns with a resentful squeal. An almost full bottle of vodka is standing on the chest of drawers. The Captain takes a drink straight from the bottle, his breath catches a bit, and puffing and blowing into his whiskers he goes to the fireplace and pours some vodka for Chang into the saucer that stands near it. Chang starts lapping up the vodka thirstily. The Captain lights a cigarette and goes back to bed, to wait until it grows quite light. They can already hear the distant hum of the tramcar, the clatter of hoofs is already continuous down in the street below, but it is still too early to go out. The Captain lies in bed, smoking. Now that Chang has lapped up all the vodka he wants to lie down too. He jumps on to the Captain's bed, curls up at his feet, and slowly enters that blissful state which vodka invariably produces in him. His half-closed eyes become misted, he gazes weakly at his master and, feeling a mounting tenderness for him, thinks what in human language may be expressed thus: "Ah, you stupid, stupid dear! There's only one truth in the world, and if you only knew how wonderful it is." And once again Chang either dreams or remembers that long-ago morning when after that awful, restless ocean the ship, sailing from China with the Captain and Chang, entered the Red Sea.

And Chang dreams or remembers this:

As the ship passed Perim, she slowed down her flinging and tossing to a lulling swing, and Chang fell into a sweet, deep sleep. Suddenly he was awake. And when he awoke he could not have been more surprised: everything was so quiet, the ship vibrated gently and did not go up or down, the water running somewhere beyond the walls made a

quiet, swishing sound, and the kitchen smell coming from under the door was lovely... Chang sat up and looked into the empty mess room: there, in the dusk, something lilac-and-gold was glowing softly, something that eluded the eye but gladdened the heart amazingly; there, the back port-holes had been opened wide into the sunny blue emptiness, into freedom, space and fresh air, and along the low ceiling flowed undulating mirror-clear streams, they flowed and flowed and did not flow away. And the same thing that often happened in those days to the Captain then happened to Chang: all at once he knew that there was not one but two truths in life—one, that living in the world and sailing was awful, and the other... But before he could put this second truth into words, the door was suddenly flung wide and he saw the ladder going up to the spar-deck, he saw the huge black shiny funnel, the clear summery sky, and the Captain coming quickly from the engine room, freshly washed and shaved, a radiant look in his keen light eyes, the tips of his mustaches turned up in the German fashion, smelling of toilet water, and dressed in everything snowwhite and stiffly starched. And when Chang saw all this he sprang forward so joyfully that the Captain caught him in flight, kissed him on the head and, turning back, leapt on to the spar-deck in three jumps with Chang in his arms, and from there even higher up to that same bridge where it had been so frightening to be when they were in the mouth of the great Chinese river.

Once there, the Captain went into the chart-house while Chang, who had been dropped on the floor, sat there with his fox's tail fluffed out on the smooth boards. Behind Chang it was hot and light from the sun that had not yet risen very high in the sky. It was probably as hot in Arabia which was moving past very close on their right with its golden beaches, black-and-brown ranges, the peaks like mountains on a dead planet and also heaped with dry gold, and the whole of its mountainous sandy desert seen so clearly that it looked near enough for a jump across. Here, high up on the bridge, it was still early morning with a light, fresh freeze blowing, and there was the First Officer briskly walking up and down—the same officer who so often drove Chang insane with fury by blowing into his nose—a

man wearing a white uniform, a white topee, and horrible black glasses through which he kept glancing at the sky-high tip of the front mast above which curled the flimsiest of clouds, like an ostrich feather... And then the Captain shouted from the chart-house: "Chang, breakfast! " And Chang jumped up at once and smartly leapt over the brass threshold into the chart-house. It was even nicer here than on the bridge. There was a wide leather sofa, secured to the wall on which hung some strange round things under gleaming glass with dials and hands like wall clocks, and on the floor stood a finger bowl with a swill of bread and sweet condensed milk. Chang began to lap it greedily, and the Captain got down to work: he unrolled a large sea chart on a counter that ran under the window across from the sofa, and placing a ruler on it drew a long line with red ink. Chang, who had finished eating and still had milk on his whiskers, jumped on to the counter and sat close to the window from which he saw the wide navy blue blouse of a sailor who, with his back to the window, stood behind a wheel with horns on it. And here the Captain, who it later transpired was very fond of talking when alone with Chang, said:

"See, laddie, this here is the Red Sea. We must navigate it very cleverly, see how speckled it is with all those little islands and reefs, and I've got to deliver you to Odessa safe and sound because they already know of your existence. I've already blabbed out the secret about you to one very, very spoiled little girl, I bragged to her about you over that long cable which clever people have laid along the floor of all the oceans and seas. You know, Chang, I really am terribly happy, I'm so happy that you can't even imagine how I'd hate to run into one of those reefs and cover myself with disgrace from head to toe on my very first long voyage..." Saying this, the Captain suddenly glared at Chang and slapped him: "Paws off the chart! " he shouted peremptorily: "Keep off the ship's property! " Chang tossed his head, growled and screwed up his eyes. This was the first time in his life that he was slapped on the face; he felt injured, and once again believed that living in this world and sailing was rotten. He turned away, contracting his transparently bright eyes, and, snarling softly, bared his wolfish teeth. But the

Captain paid no attention to Chang's hurt feelings. He lit a cigarette, sat down on the sofa, took his gold watch out of his breast pocket, and using a hard finger nail to open the lids gazed at the shiny, strangely alive and hurrying something that ran inside the watch with a merry, tinkling sound, and again spoke to Chang in a friendly tone. He told him once again that he was taking him to Odessa, to Elizavetinskaya Street, that in this Elizavetinskaya Street he had, first, a flat, second—a beautiful wife, and third—a lovely daughter, and that he was really a very fortunate man.

"I am fortunate, Chang, no matter what," the Captain said, and after a moment continued: "This daughter of mine is a very lively, inquisitive and stubborn little girl, it's going to be rough for you at times, for your tail especially. But if you only knew, Chang, what a charming creature she is! I love her so much that it even frightens me: you see, she is my whole world, or perhaps I should say almost she alone, and is that how it should be? And anyway should one love anyone so terribly? Surely all those Buddahs of yours were no stupider than you and I, and just listen to what they say about this love of the world and everything corporeal in general—from sunlight, from a sea wave, from air, down to a woman, a child, and the smell of white accacia. Or again, d'you know what Tao is, also invented by you Chinese? Frankly, I don't know it any too well myself, mate, nor does anyone else, but from what I can understand of it what does it mean? The Mother of all Things produces all things and absorbs them, and in absorbing them again produces all living things in the world, or in other words it's the Way of All Living Things which nothing living should go against. And yet we are always going against it, we always want to change everything our way, not just the heart of the woman we love, but even the whole world! Living in the world is frightening, Chang, it's very good but frightening at the same time, especially for people like me. I'm much too greedy for happiness, and I stray far too often: is this Way dark and malicious, or the very, very opposite?"

After a silence he added:

"Where's the main rub? When you love someone no power on earth will make you believe that the person you love can possibly not love you. And that's where the crux

is, Chang. But life is marvellous, Lord, it's marvellous! "

The ship, heated by the sun, that had now risen high in the sky, and trembling slightly on the run, was tirelessly cleaving the Red Sea, becalmed in the abyss of sultry air. The radiant void of the tropical sky showed through the open door. It was nearing midday, and the brass threshold blazed in the sun. The glassy waves, flaring up with a dazzling sparkle that lit up the chart-house, were rolling more and more slowly. Chang was sitting on the sofa, listening to the Captain. The Captain, who had been stroking Chang's head as he spoke, suddenly pushed him off to the floor, saying: "It's too hot, mate, get off," but this time Chang did not mind, for life was too good on this wonderful day. And then...

Once again Chang's dream breaks off.

"Come on, Chang, let's go," says the Captain, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. And again Chang sees to his amazement that he is not on the ship in the Red Sea, but in an attic in Odessa, and that it is indeed high noon outside, only the day is not wonderful at all, it's overcast, bleak and unfriendly. And Chang growls softly at the Captain for disturbing his sleep. But the Captain, taking no notice of Chang, puts on his old navy cap and overcoat and walks to the door, hunching his shoulders and stuffing his hands in his pockets. So Chang has to jump down from the bed, whether he likes it or not. The Captain walks down the stairs with a heavy, reluctant tread, as if he were performing a necessary but tiresome task. Chang rolls down the stairs rather quickly, buoyed up by the still tingling irritation which always follows upon the blissful state produced by the vodka...

Yes, it's two years now that all Chang and the Captain have been doing, day in day out, is going from one restaurant to the other. There they drink, eat, and look at the other drunks, eating and drinking at the other tables amid the noise, the tobacco smoke and all kinds of stench. Chang lies on the floor at the Captain's feet, and the Captain sits and smokes with his elbows firmly planted on the table, from force of a seaman's habit, waiting for the hour when, in obedience to some rule he himself has invented, it will be time to shift to another restaurant or café. They have break-

fast at one place, drink coffee at another café, have dinner somewhere else, and supper at a different restaurant again. As a rule, the Captain sits locked in silence. But sometimes, when he meets one of his old friends, he will talk all day, with never a pause, about the worthlessness of life, treating himself and his friend to more and more wine all the time, and not forgetting Chang who always has a saucer or something set beside him on the floor. This is exactly how they will spend today too. They have arranged to have breakfast with the Captain's old friend, an artist in a top hat. And this means that they will first sit in a smelly beer hall among ruddy-faced Germans—dull, matter-of-fact people who work from morning to night in order to eat, drink, work again and produce their like,—then they'll go to a coffee house packed with Greeks and Jews, whose whole existence is as senseless but very anxious, engrossed in constant anticipation of stock market rumours, and from the coffee house they will go to the restaurant where all the dregs of humanity forgather, and there they will stay till late at night...

A winter day is short, and it is even shorter when you sit chatting with a friend over a bottle of wine. Chang, the Captain and the artist have already been to the beer hall and the coffee house, and they have been sitting and drinking for hours in the restaurant. And again the Captain, his elbows planted on the table, is passionately asserting to his friend that there is only one truth in life, a malicious and vile truth. Take a look about you, he is saying, just think of all those people you and I see every day in the beer hall, in a coffee house, in the street. My friend, I've seen the whole planet, life is the same everywhere. It's all a pack of lies that people supposedly live by some higher feelings: they have no god, no conscience, no sensible aim in life, no love, no friendship, no honesty—not even simple compassion. Life is a bleak winter day in a filthy pub, that's all it is...

And Chang, lying under table, listens to all this talk in a drunken haze from which the excitement has now evaporated. Does he agree or disagree with the Captain? He can't answer definitely, and since he can't he must be in a bad way. Chang does not know, he cannot understand whether the Captain is right or wrong, but then, of course, it's only in sorrow that we all say: "I don't know, I can't understand."

In gladness, every living creature is certain that it knows everything, understands everything... But suddenly a ray of sunlight seems to pierce this fog: the band leader raps his stick sharply on the music stand, a violin begins to play, then a second one, a third one... They sing more and more passionately, more and more tunefully, and now Chang's soul overflows with quite another sadness, quite another anguish. His soul trembles from some inexplicable rapture, from some dulcet pain, from a yearning for something and Chang no longer knows if he's asleep or awake. He surrenders to the music with his entire being, he follows it meekly into some other world, and again he seems himself on the threshold of that beautiful world as a foolish, trusting puppy on the ship in the Red Sea...

"Now, how was it really?" he is either thinking or dreaming. "Ah yes, I remember: it was good to be alive on that hot day in the Red Sea. Chang and the Captain sat in the chart-house and then stood on the bridge... Oh, how gloriously bright was the sun, the sparkle, the infinite blue! How wonderfully colourful against the blue of the sky were all those sailors' blouses—white, red and yellow—hung up with the sleeves spread out to dry on the poop. And then Chang, together with the Captain and the other seamen, all of whom had brick-red faces, oily eyes and white, sweating foreheads, had lunch in the hot first-class mess room where the electric fan hummed and blew air from a corner, and after lunch he took a nap, after tea he had dinner, and then sat upstairs again outside the chart-house where a servant had placed a canvas armchair for the Captain, and stared beyond the sea at the variously coloured and variously shaped little clouds tinted with the palest of greens, and at the wine-red sun which was shorn of rays and which, on touching the hazy horizon, suddenly stretched out to look like a dark, flame-coloured mitre... The ship ran after the sun so quickly that the smooth humps of water with a sheen like bluish-purple leather seemed to race past, but the sun was hurrying, the sea seemed to be sucking it in, and it grew smaller and smaller until it became a long red-hot coal, then it shuddered and went out, and the moment it went out a shadow of sorrow fell upon the whole world, and the wind that had been blowing harder as night approached, became

more agitated. Gazing at the dark flame of the sunset, the Captain sat with uncovered head, his hair ruffled by the wind, a pensive, proud and sad look on his face, but even so he appeared happy and not just this whole ship, hurrying in obedience to his will, but the whole world was in his power, because in that moment the whole world was in his soul—and also because already then there was the smell of wine on his breath...

But when night came, it was frightening and magnificent. It was pitch-black and alarming, with the erratic wind and the waves, full of a light of their own, smashing against the ship so noisily that at moments Chang, running after the Captain who paced the deck quickly with never a pause, jumped back from the railing with a terrified squeal. And again the Captain picked Chang up and putting his cheek to Chang's excitedly beating heart—it was beating just as excitedly as the Captain's—walked with him to the very end of the deck, to the end point, and stood there in the darkness for a long time, fascinating Chang with a wondrous yet terrible spectacle: from under the tall and enormous stern, from under the gruffly churning screw, myriads of white-hot needles burst forth with a crisp rustle and instantly flew away into the snowily glittering wake, left by a brilliant flash inside the seething humps of water and as the flash waned they went on smoking mysteriously with a pale green phosphorescence. The wind whipped at Chang's face from this side and that, now painfully, now softly, and chilled the thick fur on his chest as it blew the hairs apart. Clinging hard and familiarly to the Captain, Chang smelt something like cold sulphur, he breathed of the ploughed-up bowels of the sea, and the stern trembled, lifted and lowered by some great and unutterably free force, while he himself rocked and rocked, excitedly watching the blind and dark but prodigiously alive and gruffly mutinous Deep. Now and again, a particularly wayward and heavy wave, noisily racing past the stern, shed an eerie light on the Captain's hand and silvered his clothes...

That night the Captain took Chang to his cabin, a large and cosy cabin softly lit by a desk lamp with a red silk shade. On the desk, which was fitted tightly into the space next to the Captain's bed, stood two framed photographs in

the light and the shadow thrown by the lamp. One was a photograph of a pretty and cross-looking girl, her hair done in tight sausage curls, who sprawled in a deep armchair with a petulant air. The other showed a young woman, standing with a white lace parasol on her shoulder and wearing a wide-brimmed lace hat and a lovely spring frock. She was slender, delicate, charming and wistful like a Georgian princess. And with the black waves roaring outside the open window, the Captain said:

"No, Chang, that woman is not going to love you and me. *There are women, you see, who are always pining with a melancholy sort of longing for love and who, for this reason, never love anyone.* There are such women, and how can you blame them for their heartlessness, deceitfulness, their dreams of the stage, of an automobile of their own, of picnics on private yachts, of some sportsman who unsticks his greasily pomaded hair into a central parting? Who can solve the riddle of such women? To each his own, Chang, and do they not, perhaps, obey those most mysterious bid-dings of Tao as they are obeyed by some marine creature, freely moving about in these black waves, covered with a lurid carapace?"

"Phew," the Captain said, sitting down on a chair and shaking his head as he unlaced his white shoes. "If you only knew what hell it was when I felt for the first time that she was already not wholly mine, the night she went to a ball at the yacht-club by herself for the first time and returned in the early hours looking like a wilted rose, pale because she was tired and because her excitement had not yet subsided, with eyes that were all black pupils and so remote from me! If you only knew what a priceless fool she wanted to make of me, with what innocent amazement she asked me: 'Poor dear, still up?' At that, the words stuck in my throat, she understood me at once, said no more, she only darted a look at me and silently began to undress. I wanted to kill her, but she said to me dryly and calmly: 'Help me undo my dress at the back,' and meekly I went to her and with shaking hands started undoing all those hooks and snaps, and no sooner did I see her body in the opened dress, the hollow between her shoulder blades, her chemise which was tucked into her corsets, and no sooner did I catch the smell

of her black hair and glanced into the lighted mirror which reflected her breasts, pushed up by her corset, than I..." And, with a hopeless gesture, the Captain let the sentence trail.

He undressed, lay down and put out the light, and Chang, twisting and turning before he settled down to sleep on the leather armchair beside the desk, saw the black pall of the sea furrowed by intermittent streaks of a white flame, he saw some lights flickering ominously on the black horizon, he saw a frightening, live wave starting from back there and coming at them with an angry hissing and growling to rear higher than the side of the ship and peeping into the cabin—a fairy-tale dragon with glowing eyes of transparent emeralds and sapphires, the whole of it translucent from the glow—he saw how the ship pushed the dragon away and ran on at an even speed amid the heavy, heaving masses of this antemundane natural element, which had become alien and hostile to us, called the ocean ...

In the night the Captain suddenly shouted something and himself startled by his shout, which rang out with a humiliating pitiful passion, woke up instantly. He lay still for a minute, then he sighed and said with a bitter chuckle:

" 'As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman without discretion! ' You never said a truer word, Solomon the Wise! "

Groping in the dark, he found his cigarette case, lit a cigarette, drew on it once or twice, then dropped his hand and fell asleep with the tip of the cigarette glowing between his fingers. All became silent again, and only the waves glittered, swayed and noisily raced past the ship. The Southern Cross emerged from behind the black clouds...

Suddenly, there is a deafening, thunderous crush. Chang jumps up in fright. What's happened? Has the ship struck some underwater reef again as it did three years ago because the Captain was drunk? Or has he fired his pistol again at his lovely, melancholy wife? No, it's not night, there is no sea, nor is it a sunny winter day in Elizavetinskaya Street. This is a very brightly lit, noisy and smoke-filled restaurant, and it was the drunken Captain who crashed his fist down on the table as he shouted to the artist:

"Rot, rot! A jewel of gold in a swine's snout, that's

what your woman is. 'I have decked my bed with coverings of tapestry, with carved works, with fine linen of Egypt: come, let us take our fill of love ... the goodman is not at home... Ah, woman! her house is the way to hell, going down to the chamber of death...' But enough, enough, my friend. It's late, they're locking up, let's go."

In another minute the Captain, Chang and the artist are already out in the dark street where the snow-laden wind blows out the lamps. The Captain kisses the artist and they go their different ways. Chang, half-asleep and sour-tempered, trots along the pavement behind the quickly striding and swaying Captain. Another day has passed—dream or reality? And again there's darkness, cold and weariness in the world...

And that is how monotonously pass Chang's days and nights. And then, all of a sudden one morning the world, like their ship, runs head-on into an underwater reef, hidden from inattentive eyes. Awakening that winter morning Chang is amazed by the great silence reigning in the room. He jumps up quickly, runs to the Captain's bed and sees him lying with his head thrown back, his face pale and frozen, and his half-closed eyes motionless. At the sight of those eyes Chang lets out such a heart-rending howl that one might think an automobile speeding along the esplanade had knocked him down and cut him in two.

Later, when the door never stands still because of all those people coming and going, coming and going, and talking in loud voices—janitors, policemen, the artist, and all the other gentlemen with whom the Captain used to sit and drink in the restaurants, Chang turns to stone. Oh, what terrible words the Captain once spoke: "In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble ... and those that look out of the windows be darkened ... and also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way ... because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets ... for the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern..." But even horror Chang does not feel now. He is lying on the floor, with his muzzle turned to the corner, and his eyes shut tight so as not to see the world, to forget it. And the world hums above him, hollowly and remotely, like the sea over someone who is

sinking deeper and deeper into its infiniteness.

It is only on the porch of the church that he recovers his senses. He sits there with drooping head, feeling half-dead and dull, and shivering all over. Suddenly the door of the church is thrown wide open, and a beautiful picture, woven of sound and song, smites at Chang's eyes and heart: he sees before him a darkish Gothic hall, lights like red stars, a whole forest of tropical plants, an oakwood coffin raised high on a black platform, a black crowd of people, two women—divine in their marble beauty and deep mourning, who may have been the eldest and the youngest sister,—and above all that a hubbub, bursts of thunder, the priests and deacons crying out in ringing voices about some sorrowful rejoicing of the angels, jubilation, confusion, grandeur, and heavenly singing covering everything. And at this sonorous spectacle Chang feels such heartache and rapture that all his hair stands up on end. The artist, emerging from the church in that very moment with eyes red from weeping, stops in amazement.

"Chang, Chang, what's the matter with you?" he asks anxiously, bending down to Chang.

Touching Chang's head with a trembling hand, he bends lower still, and their eyes, filled with tears, hold so much love for each other when they meet that Chang's whole being shouts soundlessly to the whole world: "No, no, there is some other truth on earth, a third truth, unknown to me! "

That same day, on returning from the cemetery, Chang moves over to the house of his third master, once again to the top floor, into an attic, but a warm one smelling beautifully of cigars, softly carpeted, comfortable with old-world furniture, hung with huge pictures and samite draperies... Darkness descends, the fireplace is heaped full of somberly crimson heat, Chang's new master sits in an armchair. He has not even taken off his overcoat and silk hat; he sits in this deep armchair smoking a cigar and gazes into the dimness of his studio. Chang is lying on the hearthrug, his eyes closed and his nose resting on his paws.

Someone else is also lying down now, there, outside the darkening town, behind the cemetery wall in something that is called a tomb or a grave. But that someone is not the

Captain, no. If Chang loves and senses the Captain, if he sees him with the vision of memory, that deity which is something no one understands, it means that the Captain is still with him in that world without beginning or end to which Death has no access. In that world there must be only one truth—the third—and what that truth is is known to his last master to whom very soon now Chang must return.

Vassilyenskoye, 1916.

Translated by Olga Shartse

MAXIM GORKY

(1868—1936)

Maxim Gorky had an enormous influence on the development of Russian literature at the turn of the century. His fidelity to realism, his elaboration and practice of the method of socialist realism made a significant contribution to the progress of world, let alone Russian, literature. The popularity he enjoyed in his lifetime both at home and abroad was truly amazing. For the tenth jubilee of his establishment as a writer, an album dedicated to him was brought out, and Gorky's portrait was placed among such greats as Pushkin, Nekrasov, Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

Gorky was the first author in the world to write a novel about the working class—"Mother" (1906). Earlier, in 1902, he had started a

Russian book-publishing association "Znanie" round which he rallied all the democratically-minded realist writers of the day, among them Ivan Bunin, Alexander Kuprin, Ivan Shmelev, A. Serafimovich.

One of the leading themes in Gorky's pre-revolutionary work was the theme of the frightening and corrupt power of lower middle class proprietorship, inert, stultified thought, dark and destructive instincts, bestial at bottom, sullen, embittered loneliness, and a fatalistic submission to blind, cruel fate. Gorky dedicated all his talent to struggle against this "kingdom of darkness", and rapturously welcomed the 1917 October Revolution which did away once and for all with the economic and social basis for exploitation.

A MAN IS BORN

It was in the famine year of '92, between Sukhum and Ochemchiry, on the river Kodor, a stone's throw from the sea—the splash of the running surf could be heard distinctly above the cheerful babble of the glittering mountain stream.

Autumn. Yellow leaves of the cherry laurel tree were spinning and darting about in the white foam of the Kodor like nimble trout. I was sitting on the riverside rocks, thinking that the gulls and cormorants, too, were probably taking the leaves for fishes and were disappointed—and that was why they were crying in such a hurt tone out there, on the right, beyond the trees, where the sea was lapping the shore.

The chestnut trees overhead were spangled with gold, and at my feet lay numerous leaves that looked like hands that had been severed from human wrists. The branches of the hornbeam on the opposite bank were already bare and hung in the air like a torn net. As if caught within it, there hopped a yellow-and-red mountain woodpecker, tapping at the bark of the trunk with its black beak to drive out the insects, which were gobbled up by those visitors from the far north—the spry little tomtits and grey nuthatches.

On my left, low over the mountain tops, hung smoky clouds, threatening rain. Their shadows crept over the green slopes where the dead-looking boxwood grew and where, in the hollows of the ancient beeches and lindens, one can find wild honey, which in the days of Rome nearly brought about the undoing of Pompey the Great's soldiers, a whole legion of whom were knocked off their feet by its intoxicating sweetness. The bees make it from the blossoms of the laurel and azalea, and passers-by scoop it out of tree hollows and eat it spread on *lavash*—thin wheaten cakes.

That is exactly what I was doing, sitting on the rocks under the chestnut trees and nursing the stings of an angry

bee. I dipped pieces of bread into a tea can filled with honey and ate while admiring the idle play of the tired autumn sun.

The Caucasus in autumn is like the interior of a sumptuous cathedral built by men of great wisdom—they are invariably great sinners too—to conceal their past from the sharp eyes of conscience; a vast temple of gold, turquoise and emeralds; mountainsides carpeted with the finest rugs woven in silk by the Turkmen and in Samarkand and She-maha. They robbed the whole world and brought all their spoils here before the eyes of the sun, as much as to say: “Thine—from Thine—to Thee! ”

I see long-bearded grey-haired giants, wide-eyed like blithe children, coming down the mountains, decorating the land, scattering their multicoloured treasures with a lavish hand, covering the mountain tops with thick layers of silver, and draping the terraces with the living fabric of manifold trees—and under their hands this heaven-blessed patch of land becomes transformed into a thing of ineffable beauty.

What a splendid calling—that of a man in this world! What a wealth of wonderful things one sees, how poignantly sweet is the quiet delight in beauty that stirs one’s heart!

To be sure, at times you find it hard. Burning hatred fills your breast and anguish greedily sucks your heart’s blood, but this cannot last for ever. Even the sun often looks down on men very sadly: it has worked so hard for them, and what a poor lot they have turned out to be...

Naturally, there are quite a few good ones, but they need to be mended, or rather, to be remade anew.

Above the bushes on my left I see dark bobbing heads. Through the murmurs of the surf and the gurglings of the river one can faintly hear the sound of human voices. They belong to the “famine-stricken”, who had been building a road in Sukhum, and were now on their way to Ochemchiry, in the hope of getting another job there.

I know them—they are from Orel. I had worked with them and we had been paid off together the day before. I had left before them, at night, so as to reach the seashore in time to see the sunrise.

There were five of them—four muzhiks and a young peasant woman with high cheekbones. She was pregnant; her

huge belly protruded upwards, and there was a scared look in her blue-grey staring eyes. I see her head in a yellow kerchief, swaying above the bushes like a blossoming sunflower in the wind. Her husband had died in Sukhum—he had over-eaten himself on fruit. I had lived with these people in the same bunk house: true to the good old Russian custom, they had talked about their misfortunes so much and so loudly that their lamentations must have been heard a good three miles away.

These were dull people, crushed by misfortune, which had torn them from their native, worn-out, starving soil and swept them like autumn leaves to this place, where the strange, luxuriant clime staggered and dazzled them; the hard conditions of work had stunned them altogether. They looked at everything around them bewilderedly out of sad, blinking, faded eyes, and smiled pitifully to each other, saying in low voices:

“Ai-ai, what land! ”

“Rich isn’t the word! ”

“A bit stony, though.”

“Not easy land, I must say.”

And then they recalled Kobyli Lozhok, Sukhoi Gon, Mokrenkoye—their native places, where every handful of earth was the ashes of the forefathers, where everything was well remembered, familiar and dear, watered with their sweat.

There had been another woman with them there—a tall, straight, lantern-jawed woman with a chest as flat as a board, and with dull, coal-black squinting eyes.

In the evening she, together with the woman in the yellow kerchief, would go out back of the bunk house, sit down on a heap of stones, and with her cheek propped in her hand and her head tilted to one side, would sing in a high-pitched angry voice:

*Beyond the village churchyard,
Among the bushes green,
On the yellow sand I'll spread
My shawl so white and clean.
And there I'll wait
For my loving bonny lad*

*And when he comes
I'll greet him heartily...*

The one in the yellow kerchief was usually silent, looking down with bent neck at her abdomen, but sometimes she would suddenly join in, singing the sobbing words of the song in a deep, lazy masculine voice:

*Ah, my darling,
Ah, dear heart,
I am not fated
To see thee more...*

In the black stuffy darkness of the southern night, these weeping voices reminded one of the snowy wilderness of the north, of shrieking blizzards and the distant howl of wolves...

Then the cross-eyed woman fell ill with fever and was carried to town on a canvas stretcher. She shivered on it and moaned as if continuing her song about the churchyard and the yellow sand.

...The head in the kerchief dived and disappeared.

I finished my breakfast, covered the honey in my can with leaves, tied up my knapsack and followed leisurely in the track of the other people, my cornel-wood stick tapping on the hard ground.

There I was, on the narrow strip of the roadway. On my right heaved the deep-blue sea. It seemed as if invisible carpenters were working at it with thousands of planes, and the white shavings raced, rustling, for the beach, driven on by the wind, which was moist, warm and fragrant, like the breath of a wholesome woman. A Turkish felucca, heeling over to port, was slipping through the water headed for Sukhum, her sails puffed out like the fat cheeks of that pompous engineer in Sukhum—a most important personage. For some reason he always used to say “shush oop” for “shut up”, and “moibee” for “may be”.

“Shush oop! Moibee you think you’re smart, but I’ll have you hauled off to the police station in two ticks! ”

He liked to have people dragged off to the police station, and it is good to think that the grave worms by now had

probably cleaned him down to the bones.

The going was easy, like floating through the air. Pleasant thoughts, motley-garbed memories weaved their slow dance through my mind. The dancing figures within me were like the waves in the sea—white-crested on top, and calm underneath in the depths, where the bright and buoyant hopes of youth swam quietly, like silvery fishes in the briny deep.

The road crept to the seashore, winding its way nearer and nearer to the sandy strip that was lapped by the waves. Even the bushes seemed eager to get a glimpse of the sea as they leaned over the ribbon of the road, straining towards the blue immensity of the watery wilderness.

A wind was blowing from the mountains—a sign of rain.

A low moan came from the bushes—a human moan, which always strikes a responsive chord in human hearts.

I parted the bushes and saw the woman in the yellow kerchief. She was leaning against the trunk of a walnut tree, her head drooping on her shoulder, her mouth contorted, her eyes wild and bulging. Her hands were on her huge belly and she was breathing in such a dreadfully unnatural way that her belly jerked convulsively, while she held it in her hands, moaning and baring yellow wolfish teeth.

"What is it? Has someone hit you?" I asked, bending over her. She worked her bare legs spasmodically in the grey dust and gasped, rolling her heavy head:

"Go away... Have you no shame, go away..."

I realised then what it was—I had seen it once before. I was frightened, of course, and started back, but the woman began to howl in a loud, drawn-out voice, her eyes fairly popping out of her head. Tears welled up in them and rolled down her flushed tensed face.

This made me go back to her. I threw down my knapsack, kettle and tea can, laid her down flat on her back and was about to bend her knees up when she pushed me away, struck me in the face and chest, turned and crept farther into the bushes on all fours, snarling and growling like a she-bear:

"Devil! Beast! "

Her arms gave way and she pitched forward on her face. She began to scream again, stretching her legs convulsively.

In a fever of excitement I quickly recollected everything

I knew about this business. I turned her over on her back and bent up her legs—the membrane had already emerged.

“Lie still, it’s coming.”

I ran down to the beach, rolled up my sleeves, washed my hands and went back to act as midwife.

The woman writhed like birch-bark in a bonfire. She smacked the ground around her with her hands, tore up tufts of wilted grass which she kept trying to stuff into her mouth, and in doing so dropped earth on her contorted ghastly face with its wild bloodshot eyes. Then the membrane broke and the child’s head appeared. I had to restrain the convulsive movements of her legs, help the child emerge and see that she did not stuff grass into her twisted moaning mouth.

We swore at each other a bit—she through clenched teeth, I just as quietly. She from pain and, perhaps, from shame, I from embarrassment and infinite compassion.

“God! ” she gasped, biting her livid foaming lips, while from her eyes, which seemed suddenly to have faded in the sun, there poured the copious tears of a mother’s terrible torment and her whole body was racked as if it were being torn asunder.

“Go away ... you ... devil! ”

She kept pushing me away with twisted arms, and I said earnestly:

“Don’t be a fool! Hurry up and get it over.”

I was terribly sorry for her, and it seemed as if her tears were gushing from my eyes. Anguish gripped my heart and I felt like screaming. In fact I did scream:

“Quick! Hurry up! ”

And lo—in my arms lay a man-child—a red bit of humanity. Though tears dimmed my eyes I could see that he was all red and, already displeased with the world, was struggling, kicking up dust and yelling lustily, though still tied to his mother. He had blue eyes, a funny little nose squashed on a red rumpled face and his lips moved as he bawled:

“Ya-a-a... Ya-a-a...”

He was so slippery I was afraid he would slip out of my hands. I was on my knees, looking at him, laughing—I was that glad to see him. And I had completely forgotten what had to be done next.

"Cut the cord..." the mother whispered, her eyes closed, her face drawn and grey like that of a corpse. Her blue lips barely stirred as she repeated:

"Cut it ... with your knife."

My knife had been stolen in the bunk house, so I bit through the navel cord. The baby bawled like one of your real Orel bassos. The mother smiled. I saw a blue light come miraculously to life in the slumberous depths of her eyes, and her dark hand fumbled in her skirt, searching for her pocket, while she breathed through blood-stained bitten lips:

"I've no ... strength... Bit of tape ... in my pocket... Tie up ... navel."

I found the tape and tied up the baby's navel. Her smile brightened, so happy and radiant that it all but dazzled me.

"Put yourself straight while I go and wash him."

She murmured anxiously:

"Take care. Do it gently. Take care."

That red bit of humanity did not need gentle handling at all. He clenched his fists and yelled as if he were challenging me to a fight.

"That's the stuff! Assert yourself, old chap, if you don't want your fellow men to twist your head off for you."

He emitted his most earnest and loudest yell when he felt the touch of spray from a wave that splashed over both of us; afterwards, when I began to slap his chest and back, he screwed up his eyes, and began to struggle and scream as the waves washed over him one after another.

"Yell away, old chap! Yell your head off! "

When we got back to his mother we found her lying on the ground with her eyes closed again, biting her lips in the throes of afterbirth; but through the groans and sighs I heard her dying whisper:

"Give him ... to me..."

"He can wait."

"Give him to me! "

With fumbling, trembling hands she began to undo her blouse. I helped her to free her breast, which nature had made for the nurturing of twenty infants, and laid the

obstreperous Orelia against her warm body. He twigged at once and stopped yelling.

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God," the woman breathed, quivering, rolling her dishevelled head from side to side on the knapsack.

Suddenly, with a low cry, she opened her eyes again, the sacred, inexpressibly beautiful eyes of motherhood. They were blue, and looked up into the blue sky. A happy, grateful smile gleamed and melted in them. Raising a heavy arm, the mother slowly crossed herself and her child.

"Blessed Mother of God ... Holy Virgin be praised..."

Her eyes dimmed and she remained silent for a long time, scarcely breathing. Then suddenly, in a firm, matter-of-fact voice, she said:

"Untie my knapsack, lad."

I untied the bag. She looked at me steadily with a faint smile, and I thought I saw a tingle of colour suffuse her hollow cheeks and clammy forehead.

"Go away a minute."

"Take it easy."

"All right. Go away."

I moved away into the bushes. My heart felt tired, and it seemed as if blithe birds were singing in my breast. This, together with the ceaseless murmur of the sea, was so good that I could listen to it for a year.

Somewhere nearby I heard the babble of a brook. It was like a girl telling her friend about her beloved.

Above the bushes rose a head in a yellow kerchief, now tied in the proper way.

"Hey, what's this? You're up too soon, aren't you?"

Holding on to the branches of a bush, she sat there ashen-faced, as though all the life had been drained from her, and with two great blue pools instead of eyes. She smiled and whispered with tender emotion:

"Look how he sleeps."

He slept all right, no different from any other babies, as far as I could see. The difference, if any, was in the surroundings: he was lying on a heap of bright autumn leaves under a bush, of the kind that don't grow in the Orel countryside.

"You ought to lie down, mother."

"No," she said, shaking her head feebly. "I've got to tidy up and move along to that place—what d'you call it?"

"Ochemchiry?"

"That's it. My folks must be a good few versts away by now."

"You're not going to walk, surely?"

"What about the Holy Virgin? She'll help me."

Well, since she had the Holy Virgin for company, I had nothing more to say!

She gazed down at the puckered little face, her eyes radiating warm beams of kindly light. She licked her lips and stroked her breast with slow movements of the hand.

I lighted a fire and arranged stones around it on which to put the kettle.

"I'll make some tea for you in a minute, mother."

"Oh, do! Everything has dried up in my chest."

"What made your folks desert you?"

"Oh no, they didn't. I just dropped behind. They'd had a drink, you know ... and a good thing too. Fancy having to do this with them around."

She glanced at me and covered her face with her elbow, then spat out with blood and smiled shyly.

"This your first?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"A man, sort of..."

"So I see. Are you married?"

"Haven't had the honour."

"You're kidding! "

"I'm not."

She lowered her eyes, then said:

"How is it you know this women's business?"

Now for the kidding.

"I learned it," I said. "I'm a student—d'you know what that is?"

"To be sure I do. Our priest's eldest son is a student. He's learning to be a priest."

"Well, I'm one of those. I'll go and fetch some water."

The woman bent her head over to her baby to hear

whether he was breathing. Then she glanced towards the sea.

"I could do with a wash, but the water is strange here. What kind of water is it? It's salty and bitter."

"You go and wash in it—it's healthy water."

"Really?"

"Yes. And it's warmer than the brook, the water there's like ice."

"If you say so..."

An Abkhazian, dozing astride a horse, rode past at a walking pace, his head drooping on his chest. The wiry little horse, twitching its ears, looked askance at us with a round black eye and snorted. The rider jerked up his head, on which sat a shaggy fur hat, glanced in our direction and lowered his head again.

"Funny people round here, so fierce-looking too," the Orel woman said quietly.

I went for some water. The jet, clear and mercurial, leapt over the stones, and the autumn leaves tumbled about gaily in the water. Wonderful! I washed my hands and face, filled the kettle and walked back. Through the bushes I saw the woman crawling about on her knees, glancing back anxiously.

"What's the matter?"

She started, and her face turned grey. She was trying to conceal something under her body. I guessed what it was.

"Give it to me, I'll bury it."

"Oh, my dear! But it has to be done under the bathhouse, under the floor..."

"Can you see them building a bathhouse here soon?"

"You're joking, but I'm scared! What if some beast eats it! It's got to be buried in the ground."

She turned her face away and handed me a wet heavy bundle, saying in a low, shy voice:

"You'll do it properly, in a deep place, won't you? For the sake of Christ ... and my little one, do it properly, please..."

When I got back I saw her coming away from the beach with staggering steps and outstretched arms, her skirt wet to the waist and her face slightly flushed as if radiating from

within. I helped her to the fire, thinking with amazement: "What sheer animal strength! "

Then we drank tea with honey, and she said quietly: "So you dropped learning?"

"Yes."

"Drink, I suppose?"

"Yes, ruined by drink, mother! "

"What a shame! Mind you, I noticed you in Sukhum when you had that row with the manager about the food. I said to myself then: he must be a drunkard, he's not afraid of anybody."

She licked the honey from her swollen lips and kept turning her blue eyes to the bush where the latest Orelan was sleeping peacefully.

"I wonder how he'll live?" she said with a sigh, looking at me searchingly. "You were a help—thank you, but will it be good for him, I wonder..."

When she had eaten and drunk she crossed herself, and while I was collecting my household, she sat drowsily swaying her body, staring at the ground with eyes that seemed to have faded again. Then she stood up.

"Are you really going?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you're strong enough?"

"What about the Virgin Mary? Give him to me! "

"I'll carry him."

After an argument she yielded, and we started off, walking side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

"I hope I don't stumble," she said with an apologetic smile, placing her hand on my shoulder.

The new inhabitant of the land of Russia, the man of unknown destiny, was lying in my arms, making grownup noises through his nose. The sea, laced with white shavings, splashed and murmured; the bushes whispered to each other, the sun shone on its noontide path.

We walked along slowly, the mother stopping now and again, heaving a deep sigh, throwing her head back, gazing around at the sea, the woods, the mountains, then peering into her son's face. Her eyes, laved by the tears of suffering, were amazingly limpid again, shining with the blue light of infinite love.

Once she stopped and said:

“God! My God, how wonderful it is! How wonderful!
I could go on like this, on and on to the world’s end, with
him, my little one, growing and growing in freedom at his
mother’s breast, my darling little boy...”

The sea murmured and murmured...

1912

Translated by Bernard Isaacs

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